BEYOND EXCELLENCE THEORY:

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE GRUNIGIAN MODEL

by

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(Under the Direction of Bryan H. Reber)

ABSTRACT

Excellence theory is perhaps the most critical and dominant paradigm in the discussion and understanding of public relations theory and practice. Unfortunately, this dominance appears to have been achieved in the face of serious theoretical problems of validity, reliability, efficacy, and ethicality – as well as numerous others. Though several scholars have critiqued excellence theory in the past, a meaningful synthesis of these disjointed criticisms has not yet been produced. Along with providing a much needed summary of excellence theory's evolution and major tenets – in addition to a summary view of the alternative contingency theory – the integration of these past criticisms of excellence theory as well as the introduction of new critical analyses comprise the major goals and contents of this thesis.

INDEX WORDS: Public Relations theory, Excellence theory, Contingency theory, Game theory, Social Exchange theory, Ethics, Power, Accommodation, Collaboration, Compromise, Advocacy

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For Mary Jo Thomas, in hopes that I am still her favorite Georgian.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For nearly three decades – or at least since the 1992 publication of *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* – excellence theory has been the most dominant and influential paradigm in PR theory. Though J. E. Grunig and Hunt introduced what would be the roots of excellence theory in 1984, the theory has since evolved, and J. E. Grunig and his colleagues have continued to advocate its conceptual and practical superiority.

Although numerous scholars have elaborated on the findings of the seminal excellence study and the subsequent results published by J. E. Grunig (1992a), the core principles of excellence theory have remained largely unchanged. Namely, of the four PR models – press agentry, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical – the two-way symmetrical model is still advanced as a best-practice approach to public relations, with little room for contingent practice of the other three models. Above all, the principle of dialogue is championed as a two-way symmetrical tactic and the assertions from excellence theorists that two-way symmetry represents the most effective and ethical means of practice are commonly touted and often accepted as fact.

Unfortunately, PR scholars have been overzealous in accepting these *assertions* as communication *law*, when in fact there are many reasons to doubt such claims. Critiques of excellence theory have evolved in simultaneity with the theory itself, but they have been based on various flaws of excellence theory and have often been conducted by a disjointed body of scholars – as opposed to excellence theory, which has grown from the works of a collaborative

core group of theorists (J. E. Grunig, L. A Grunig, Dozier, Ehling, Hon, Toth, and Bowen to name a few).

Murphy (1991) was among the first to criticize excellence theory for lacking practical applicability, among other things. Leichty and Springston (1993) developed an early critical analysis of the methods used in the excellence study and questioned the reliability of key findings. Leichty (1997) later elaborated on the instances in which two-way symmetrical tactics such as dialogue and collaboration might be limited in applicability or outright inapplicable. Cameron and his colleagues (Cancel, Mitrook, Sallot, Reber, Shin, Pang, and Jin to name a few) have directly challenged the best-practice approach excellence theory represents, and the development of contingency theory, either through happenstance or necessity, has provided an organized framework around which many critics of excellence theory have rallied.

Despite this development, however, criticisms of the validity, reliability, efficacy, and ethicality of excellence theory have largely lacked significant interconnection, so they may often be seen as existing in a theoretical vacuum. These critiques – both from the scholars mentioned above and several others – pose a major challenge to the dominance of excellence theory should they be integrated and expounded upon in a conceptually meaningful way.

Such integration and elaboration are the primary goals of this current endeavor. The extent to which excellence theory is flawed only manifests itself when these critiques are viewed and understood collectively. Together, these previous criticisms – as well as those newly formed ones presented here (in particular those related to ethics) – cast serious doubt upon the validity, reliability, and applicability of the best-practice excellence model as well as the claims that two-way symmetry is the most effective and ethical form of PR practice.

CHAPTER 2

APPROACH

Before the reader continues, a few words on the approach of both how this thesis was constructed and how it is presented are merited. This work is purely conceptual, meaning that it is a qualitative work that presents no new quantitative data; any statistics within this piece are merely reported from other studies. Additionally, this thesis is similar to a macro-analysis of literature on various topics – public relations, business, power configurations, marketing, ethics, etc. – in that it provides a summary view of varying ideas. Unlike such an analysis, however, those ideas have been carefully integrated to provide more in-depth and collective meaning that did not exist within the original works. In short, they have been arranged in great detail with great care and expounded upon by the author.

The presentation of this thesis is different from most as well. Typically following the introduction are chapters reviewing the literature, explaining methodology, presenting findings or results, contextualizing those findings through discussion, and drawing conclusions. Because this thesis is conceptual, such organization would make little or no sense and has been replaced by the nine chapters that follow.

Chapter 3 takes the place of what would be the traditional literature review, as it provides a summary of excellence theory from 1984 to the present day. Seeing as excellence theory is the model of interest, an explanation of its ideas and development are in order.

Chapters 4 and 5 provide the groundwork for the critique that follows. Namely, Chapter 4 provides viable reasons to doubt the assertions of excellence theory and thus the reasons for why

such a critique is merited. Chapter 5 outlines guidelines for what constitutes a valid and useful social scientific theory, and it is by those guidelines that subsequent chapters evaluate excellence theory.

Chapters 6 and 7 contain integrating summaries of well-known criticisms of the validity, reliability, and effectiveness of excellence theory. Chapters 8 and 9 introduce the competing contingency theory and arguments for why it provides a more useful model to practitioners than excellence theory. Chapter 10 presents a short summary of Western ethical thought, the arguments posited for why excellence theory is the most ethical PR practice, and the subsequent and numerous counterarguments to refute that assertion.

Throughout all of these chapters – particularly Chapters 6 through 10 – the author draws various conclusions and presents the logical endpoints of numerous arguments within the text rather than holding all these thoughts back for a concluding chapter. However, Chapter 11 does serve as a summary of sorts, presenting the important findings and logical conclusions that the author deems the most important takeaways for the reader.

Hopefully this short discussion of approach will provide some context for the reader as he or she moves through this rather unorthodox thesis structure. Though the construction may be unique, the author feels that it provides the clearer presentation – and hopefully a clearer understanding on the part of the reader – of the critiques that follow than would a more traditional thesis structure.

CHAPTER 3

EXPLAINING EXCELLENCE THEORY

The Roots of Excellence Theory

Though J. E. Grunig's (1992a) *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* is typically considered the seminal work of excellence theory, the origins of the theory were first developed in J. E. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) *Managing Public Relations*. In this earlier work, J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) outlined a basic understanding of public relations and put forth a history of public relations as explained via the introduction of the four communication models excellence theory would later champion.

J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) define public relations as "the management of communications between an organization and its publics" (p. 6), a fairly general definition which, foundationally, remains the same throughout the development of excellence theory. J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) expound upon this definition, conceptualizing public relations as an important boundary spanning function, as practitioners are inherently positioned between internal and external publics and are thus ideal liaisons.

J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) also provide four models through which public relations can be understood. The models are conceptualized in an either/or fashion along two spectrums, the first being level of symmetry (either asymmetrical or symmetrical), the second being the direction of communication flow (either one-way or two-way). J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) use these models to explain the history of modern public relations and its century-long evolution from its primitive to current state. The history through which these models are introduced is both

linear and progressive; however, as new models are introduced, and perhaps come to dominate PR practice, the preceding models do not fade from use.

According to J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984), the earliest form of public relations – which dominated the field until the early 20th century – was press agentry. Press agentry is seen as one-way asymmetric communication and is most commonly conceived of as propaganda. The goal of the press agentry model is publicity, which can be achieved using virtually any methods necessary. The information press agents communicate is often – though not inherently – false, as practitioners of this model are not overly concerned with the truth.

J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) credit Ivy Lee for establishing the importance of truth in communication with his widespread use of the second communication model, public information. In the public information model, PR practitioners act as "journalists in residence," disseminating truthful information to external publics. Though public information is understood as a one-way asymmetric model, it differs greatly from press agentry in its objective: to provide complete truth to relevant publics so they can make informed decisions about organizations. If the truth about an organization is problematic or potentially damaging, a public information practitioner will seek to "change the behavior of the organization so the truth could be told without fear" (J. E. Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 31).

PR practitioners, however, do more than simply provide information to the public; they use that information to achieve some result. For Edward L. Bernays, that end result was behavior change, and the method was persuasion. He pioneered the two-way asymmetric model, which uses information scientifically to persuade relevant publics to adopt a desired behavior. Bernays recognized early on that persuasion could be a useful tool to align the interests of organizations and their given publics; moreover, the task of persuasion was made simpler if the outcome was

perceived to be in the public's best interest. Two-way asymmetric PR practitioners investigate which goals and means are acceptable to key publics and act in accordance to those standards.

Though J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) never explicitly expound upon it in any great detail, they do provide the groundwork for later charges of paternalism[1] against two-way asymmetric practices. The general fear is that organizations, in claiming to act in the best interest of publics, can often persuade a public to act against its self-interest, either creating or maintaining an imbalanced status quo. Out of fear that such practices could lead to unethical and socially undesirable tactics and outcomes, collegiate educators and a small number of practitioners developed the two-way symmetric model, which is the cornerstone of excellence theory.

The two-way symmetric model, as conceived of by J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984), has a dialogic focus and seeks to establish mutual understanding in a balanced relationship between organizations and publics. J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) introduce the two-way symmetric model in their work, though it is not clearly and thoroughly developed until J. E. Grunig (1992a) put forth a more definitive conceptualization. Perhaps because the two-way symmetric model was in its infancy, J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) adopted a contingency stance in applying their models:

> In this view, no one approach is appropriate all of the time and for all conditions. What is the best approach depends upon the nature of the organization and the nature of the environment in which it must survive. The contingency view represents the best way to answer which of the four models we have outlined is 'right.' It all depends… Although it will become obvious that we prefer the two-way symmetric model and will stress that model throughout this book, we recognize that there are organizations facing problems for which the other models provide the best solutions. (p. 43)

[1] The issue of paternalism as it relates both to asymmetric and symmetric PR practices arises throughout this work, but is discussed most thoroughly in Chapters 7 and 10.

Constructing the Edifice

J. E. Grunig's (1992a) *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* expounded greatly upon earlier ideas and, for practical purposes, marked a true beginning for excellence theory. This work, edited by J. E. Grunig (1992a), is the result of a collaborative effort of numerous academic scholars and a handful of PR practitioners; it was the outgrowth of an International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Research Foundation study. In it, J. E. Grunig (1992b) puts forth what he considers to be "the first general theory of public relations" (p. 2). Over a decade later, some scholars continue to claim the excellence project as "arguably the most comprehensive study of public relations to date" (Bowen, 2004, p. 65).

Much of the work focuses on answering what theorists have dubbed the excellence question: "How must public relations be practiced and the communication function be organized for it to contribute to the most organizational effectiveness [sic]" (J. E. Grunig, 1992b, p. 3). While this definition of excellence is perfectly acceptable, it hinges on organizational effectiveness, a concept which itself merits further explanation.

Excellence theorists define effectiveness in numerous ways, most often relying on Hage's (1980) definition, where effectiveness is "the achievement relative to the priorities of innovations versus cost and quality versus quantity" (p. 136). Essentially, organizational effectiveness can best be understood as prioritizing the various goals of an organization and the subsequent accomplishing of them (L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Ehling, 1992; Ehling and Dozier, 1992). In a later work, J. E. Grunig (2006) defines effectiveness most accurately and succinctly: "For an organization to be effective […] it must behave in ways that solves the problems and satisfies the goals of stakeholders as well as of management" (p. 159). Finally, in effectively satisfying the goals of organization and key publics, the approach seems to some degree accommodative, as

effectiveness also represents "how well the organization satisfies the demands of its relevant external publics" (L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Ehling, 1992, p. 76).

Questions of excellence and effectiveness provide a wider framework for excellence theorists to expound upon the ideas of J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) and to introduce other ideas in developing a model for excellent public relations. For instance, the four models of public relations introduced by J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) are paramount in this new conception of excellence theory, and they are also defined more clearly.

Many of the same concepts of J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) apply to J. E. Grunig's (1992b) description of the four models of press agentry, public information, two-way asymmetric, and two-way symmetric public relations.

Again, press agentry has little regard for truth, striving for favorable publicity, particularly through mass media channels.

The public information model makes use of the familiar "journalists in residence" to disseminate truthful and often objective information about a given organization. Public information practitioners do so using "the mass media and controlled media such as newsletters, brochures, and direct mail" (J. E. Grunig, 1992b, p. 18).

Again, the two-way asymmetric model focuses primarily on behavior change, using "research to develop messages that are most likely to persuade strategic publics to behave as the organization wants" (J. E. Grunig, 1992b, p. 18). The theme of imbalanced effect within this model is still quite prevalent in this newer conception.

Readers also see that the two-way symmetrical model emerges as the most favored model once again, described as "a model of public relations that is based on research and that uses communication to manage conflict and improve understanding with strategic publics" (J. E.

Grunig, 1992b, p. 18). Though relatively terse, this definition is much broader and clearer than what J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) present. This model has remained the cornerstone of excellence theory through the early 21st century.

While the understanding of the four original models remains largely unchanged, the eight years between the publications of the original work by J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) and J. E. Grunig's (1992a) more thorough work provided a wide window for criticism and subsequent revision. One important reaction to criticism is evidenced by J. E. Grunig's (1992b) introduction of a fifth model: mixed-motive. Murphy (1991) criticized excellence theory on the grounds that few PR departments practiced two-way symmetrical public relations, but instead used a combination of tactics, most notably two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical. As a result, Murphy (1991) developed the mixed motive model,[2] which excellence theorists co-opted. According to J. E. Grunig (1992b), "Excellent departments generally practice a mixture of the two-way symmetrical and two-way asymmetrical models – a *mixed-motive* model – although their practice is more symmetrical than asymmetrical"[3] (J. E. Grunig, 1992b, p. 19).

It becomes clear, then, that excellent public relations – though it allows for a symmetrically dominated mixed-motive model – privileges two-way symmetrical public relations over other models. The original contingency approach of J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) is thus abandoned in favor of promoting two-way symmetrical public relations as a best-practice model that focuses on understanding rather than persuasion as a primary goal (J.E Grunig and L. A. Grunig, 1992). In separating this practice from the other models, J. E. Grunig (1992d) argues that "symmetrical communication takes place through dialogue, negotiations, listening, and

[2] Murphy's (1991) mixed-motive model and other critiques of excellence theory will be more thoroughly explored in Chapter 7.

[3] The idea that the mixed-motive model as conceived by Murphy (1991) is inherently more symmetrical is actually false. This misconception is discussed in Chapter 6.

conflict management rather than through persuasion, manipulation, and the giving of orders" (p. 231).

Ironically, the apparent reason for creating the two-way symmetrical best-practice approach and abandoning the contingency model comes from Murphy's (1991) game-theory based criticisms concerning the nonuse of the two-way symmetrical model. Excellence theorists, following in Murphy's (1991) footsteps, focus on creating win-win situations for both the organization and its publics while avoiding zero-sum games.

Very briefly, "in zero-sum games, the winning party gains or wins the full amount of what the losing party has lost" (Ehling and Dozier, 1992, p. 278). In this scenario, all that can be gained is finite; therefore, the only way to increase rewards for one party (i.e., the organization) is to limit the rewards of another party (i.e., the public). The persuasion focus of the three asymmetric models coupled with practitioners' fervent desires to achieve self-interested organizational goals often creates a win-lose, zero-sum game that favors the organization, or so is the fear of excellence theorists.

Because asymmetric tactics have the potential to create poor win-lose scenarios that can disadvantage strategic publics, excellence theorists advance the dialogic two-way symmetrical model as a better communication management tool. For practitioners of the two-way symmetrical model, "the mission of communication management is to create a joint, cooperative win-win arrangement out of a risky, conflictual win-lose situation" (Ehling and Dozier, 1992, pp. 266-267) that often results from zero-sum games.

Excellence theorists advocate for the superiority of two-way symmetrical public relations because they believe the results and methods of this practice are more effective and more ethical than those of the asymmetric models. According to Dozier and Ehling (1992), "communication

managers are more successful moving two parties closer together than converting one party (publics) over wholly to the other party's (dominant coalition) perspective" (p. 178). In other words, the excellence argument is that understanding and comprising dialogue yields positive results for the organization more frequently than do persuasive tactics.

Additionally, basing their theory in what essentially amounts to a deontological framework,[4] excellence theorists argue that the two-way symmetrical model is ethically superior to the three asymmetrical models (J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig, 1992). J. E. Grunig (1992b) clearly states his belief in the ethical prowess of two-way symmetrical public relations: "Philosophically, we believe that symmetrical public relations is more ethical and socially responsible than asymmetric public relations because it manages conflict rather than wages war" (p. 10).[5]

The privileging of two-way symmetrical public relations as opposed to the endorsement of a contingency model, as well as the expansion of the original four models and the inclusion of the mixed-motive model, represent the major changes from J. E. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) early work on excellence theory and the latter, more complete authority edited by J. E. Grunig (1992a). Along with these crucial changes, there are also numerous additions which both describe excellence theory in greater detail and serve as a means to answer the "excellence question" posed earlier.

In their 1992 seminal work, excellence theorists expound upon the framework from which their theory arises and what they believe their theory can accomplish. Though J. E. Grunig (1992a) and others continually claim that their theory has positive and applicable qualities, much of *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management* "sets forth a *normative*

[4] The deontological ethical framework will be discussed in detail in Chapter 10.
[5] Chapter 10 will thoroughly explore more specific claims of ethical superiority by excellence theorists, the grounds on which those claims are made and can be judged, and the validity of this superiority assertion.

theory, a theory that prescribes how to do public relations in an ideal situation, and contrasts that theory with […] predictions of how public relations is generally practiced" (J. E. Grunig, 1992b, p. 12). The two-way symmetrical model is clearly a part of this normative theory and is a normative view in and of itself; according to J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992), "the two-way symmetrical model provides a normative theory of how public relations should be practiced" (p. 285). While the positive aspects (i.e, its applicability) of excellence theory are hotly debated, it seems fairly evident that, at the onset at least, the theory was primarily normative.

A normative theory of the public relations models must be rooted in some kind of worldview, or a given "set of images and assumptions about the world" (Kearney, 1984, p. 10). In developing a philosophical worldview in which to anchor their theory, excellence theorists examined numerous standpoints, including the conservative social role, which seeks to maintain the status quo through preserving organizational self-interest; the radical social role, which seeks to create change within an organization and thus a given society by proxy; the neutral social role, in which public relations has no real agenda; the critical social role, through which scholars elaborate on flaws within the practice in an attempt to eliminate them; and the two most relevant roles in this discussion, the pragmatic social role and the idealistic social role (J. E. Grunig and White, 1992).

The pragmatic social role is results-oriented and focuses most intently on the bottom line. Achieving an organizational goal is what is most important, and according to J. E. Grunig and White (1992), the importance of reaching these goals often overshadows important moral considerations that PR practitioners must take into account. Excellence theorists typically associate asymmetric practices with this worldview and deem the practices as unethical because,

within this worldview, there is no limit to what can be done to achieve organizational goals; thus, achieving these goals may come at the expense of personal and social morality.

The idealistic social role is one in which public relations exists primarily to serve the public interest through compromise and peaceful conflict resolution. This worldview presents a normative ideal of ethical public relations that hinges upon the norm of reciprocity. Because excellence theorists believe that "public relations should be practiced to serve the public interest, to develop mutual understanding between organizations and their publics, and to contribute to informed debate about issues in society" (J. E. Grunig, 1992b, p. 9), it is not surprising that excellence theorists develop their theory within this general worldview. By its very nature of being idealistic, however, this worldview operates under the assumption that society is *always* both pluralistic and progressive, which, in fairness, is an assumption that does not always hold (J. E. Grunig and White, 1992).

In a more specific sense than just describing general worldviews, J. E. Grunig and White (1992) describe what they call the "excellent worldview" in the following manner:

> An excellent worldview for public relations will be one that is logical, coherent, unified, and orderly – the *internal* criteria. It also should be effective in solving organizational and human problems, as judged by relatively neutral research or by history – the *external* criterion. Finally, it should be *ethical* in that it helps organizations build caring – even loving – *relationships* with other individuals and groups they affect in a society or the world. (p. 38)

Like virtually every theory, excellence theory grows out of a given worldview but exists within the confines of a concrete reality, in this case the organizational environment. Like every

aspect of business, public relations operates in the hierarchical world of organizational power and decision making, both seeking power from, and answering to, the dominant coalition.

As described by J. E. Grunig (1992b), the dominant coalition is a "group of senior managers who control the organization" (p. 5). One group of individuals always possesses the power of decision making within an organization. The size of that group and who comprises it is largely fluid within and across organizations, with numerous variables predicting inclusion – chief among them being resource control (L. A. Grunig, 1992c). According to White and Dozier (1992), the dominant coalition sits atop the hierarchy of decision making, having the final say in what an organization does or does not do. Below them are proposers, who make recommendations to the dominant coalition; next are experts, who provide scenario-specific information; then there are consultants, whose chief task is to shape how a given issue is represented; and finally, there are facilitators, who enable collaboration among the higher tiers so decisions can be made.

Where PR departments and practitioners sit in this hierarchy varies across organizations and situations. For public relations to be excellent, practitioners must move up this hierarchy to at least the level of a proposer.

Therefore, access to the dominant coalition is critical for numerous reasons (White and Dozier, 1992). First is the issue of organizational culture, which leads to the adoption of a given worldview and ultimately an organizational stance on which model of public relations is preferred. Organizational culture either springs up from within the organization or, more typically, is imposed upon it by the dominant coalition (Sriramesh, J. E. Grunig, and Buffington, 1992). Whoever controls the dominant coalition controls organizational culture, and thus the development of an organizational worldview and the sanctioning of a specific PR model (J. E.

Grunig and L. A. Grunig, 1992). In the simpler terms of power-control theory, "organizations behave in the way they do – in our case they choose the public relations programs they do – because the people who have power in an organization choose that behavior" (J. E. Grunig, 1992b, p. 23). Excellence theorists view access to the dominant coalition as paramount to achieving organizational approval for practicing public relations in a desired way, which in their case is the two-way symmetrical practice.

Excellent PR practitioners must also practice under other specific conditions for which organizational approval from the dominant coalition is critical, perhaps the most important condition being the ability to exercise some degree of autonomy (J. E. Grunig, 1992d; Dozier and L. A. Grunig, 1992). According to J. E. Grunig (1992b), "having the autonomy to pursue their goals is important for organizations, because our literature review shows that effective organizations are able to choose appropriate goals for their environmental and cultural context and then achieve those goals" (p. 11). As organizations seek autonomy as a holistic effort to maintain control, exert power, and achieve personal goals, so too do PR practitioners seek autonomy so they have the authority to practice as they see fit, in this case excellently (L. A. Grunig, 1992c).

Typically, employees of organizations that are less formalized and centralized achieve greater autonomy, and as a result they tend to be more satisfied, productive, and capable of responsibly managing themselves (J. E. Grunig, 1992d; L. A. Grunig, 1992c; J. E. Grunig, 1992c). The leaders of organizations of this type work to set goals and empower employees to achieve them, thus providing needed direction while allowing employees to maintain autonomy (J. E. Grunig, 1992d). As excellence theory purports, PR practitioners should work to transform their work environment into one that creates greater autonomy; without this autonomy, decisions

about their professional practice may be made by senior executives with little PR knowledge and with whom PR practitioners lack close relationships.

It is important to consider, however, that "autonomy […] is an idealized goal that no organization ever achieves completely" (J. E. Grunig, 1992b, p. 11). PR practitioners, like the organizations they represent, are never completely autonomous from forces within and beyond the walls of the organization. For this reason, both practitioners and organizations must contend with and maintain interdependent relationships with numerous publics (Dozier and L. A. Grunig, 1992; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Ehling, 1992; J.E Grunig, 1992d).

This interdependence between an organization and its publics once again highlights the important boundary spanning function of public relations, in which practitioners help organizations manage relationships in and around a given organization (L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Ehling, 1992). J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) briefly defined the role of boundary spanners, but White and Dozier (1992) provide a more complete definition of the role, describing boundary spanners as "individuals within the organization who frequently interact with the organization's environment and who gather, select, and relay information from the environment to decision makers in the dominant coalition" (p. 93). In this boundary spanning capacity, PR practitioners help organizations "establish and maintain mutually dependent relationships between an organization and the publics with which it interacts" (L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Ehling, 1992, p. 71)

Paradoxically, in the excellence theory conception, both autonomy and interdependence often coexist as organizational goals as well as means to obtaining power. As complete autonomy is virtually impossible for any entity, critical relationships with other individuals or organizations are most certainly inevitable (L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Ehling, 1992).

Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) speak to the simultaneously limiting and liberating effects that lost autonomy via interdependent relationships can have upon organizations: "The price for inclusion in any collective structure is the loss of discretion and control over one's activities. Ironically, to gain some control over the activities of another organization, the focal organization must surrender some of its own autonomy" (16).

Since it is given that PR practitioners must interact interdependently with entities in the environment, it is important to understand how excellence theorists conceive of the environment, namely as a group of "institutions or forces that affect the performance of the organization, but over which the organization has little control" (Robbins, 1987, p. 150). L. A. Grunig (1992) argues that organizations can react to the environment either by attempting to control various elements within it or adapting to it; given Robbins's (1987) pessimistic attitude toward control, excellence theorists tend to favor adaptation. Typically, excellent organizations accommodate their environments and relevant publics, adjusting to create a match. Tools such as coorientation analysis are useful in that they allow organizations to examine how closely their views align with those of key publics and then reorient those views and organizational practices to fit the interests of the publics in question (J. E. Grunig and Repper, 1992; Dozier and Ehling, 1992).

While the above summary describes many of the important aspects of excellent public relations and its practice – particularly the use of the two-way symmetric model – J. E. Grunig (1992a) and his colleagues elaborate upon several other apparently unrelated aspects of PR practice. What follows here is a brief description of two seemingly tangential – though scholarly important – theories: roles theory and the situational theory of publics.[6]

[6] Obviously a complete summary of excellence theory at its seminal stage – or any stage for that matter – would be lengthy and counterproductive. The goal here is to familiarize the reader with the theory's major tenets via this brief summary. For a more thorough description of excellence theory, please see J. E. Grunig's 1992 work, *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*.

Though it is of limited concern to the present discussion, Dozier's (1992) work on roles theory is an oft-cited, critical piece of *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, and thus merits some description. Dozier (1992) recognized that public relations operates on two levels, one being more strategy-oriented, the other more task-oriented. He labeled the strategy-oriented practitioners managers and the task-oriented practitioners technicians.

According to Dozier (1992), "managers make policy decisions and are held accountable for public relations program outcomes" (p. 333). With that responsibility comes power and influence within the PR department and sometimes within the dominant coalition as well. Managers are often considered experts in the field and typically employ strategic problem solving in their day to day activities.

While this management function of public relations is at the heart of excellence theory, Dozier (1992) understands that thought-based problem solving means little without tangible implementation. Technicians fill this role, "[carrying] out the low-level mechanics of generating communication products that implement policy decisions made by others" (p. 333). Planning events, writing press releases, and producing other important communication products that are perhaps most synonymous with public relations practice are typically the tasks of technicians as opposed to managers.

A considerable amount of literature exists concerning roles theory, and the same could also be said of the situational theory of publics. Still, only a rudimentary discussion of this theory is in order here. The situational theory of publics is primarily a guideline for how one would effectively segment publics, or, in other words, "divide a population, market, or audience into groups whose members are more like each other than members of other segments" (J. E. Grunig

and Repper, 1992, p. 129). Public relations centers on communicating with various publics, and any given community is comprised of numerous publics, each of which has varying concerns and characteristics; thus, each community must be communicated with differently. This is the importance of segmentation, and the situational theory of publics describes one way in which segmentation can be effectively accomplished.

The key for segmenting publics within the confines of this theory is understanding how active a public is or potentially will be in a given scenario. Three major variables influence the activeness of every public. First is problem recognition, or the perception that something is wrong or lacking. Second is constraint recognition, or the perception that individuals cannot correct the given problem because they feel they lack the ability or because of some systematic helplessness. Lastly is the level of involvement, or the perception that the issue at hand is of great importance to given individuals or publics. The situational theory of publics predicts that publics are more active if they feel highly involved in the consequences of an organization's actions, see those consequences as problematic, and believe they are free to take corrective action (J. E. Grunig and Repper, 1992; Dozier and Ehling, 1992).

The theory also purports that publics exist in a hierarchy of activeness based on the above mentioned variables. The least active public is the nonpublic, which is a group of individuals with no common problem connecting them in any meaningful way. Next is the latent public, the members of which share a common problem but have failed to recognize the problem up to this point. Third, there is the aware public, which is a group of individuals who share a recognized, common problem but are yet to take action. Finally, there is the active public, whose members are engaged in corrective action to solve a common and recognized problem (J. E. Grunig and Repper, 1992; Dozier and Ehling, 1992).

The Evolution of Excellence

Though the above discussion of excellence theory's early and seminal works has been relatively brief, it is important to consider, as Sriramesh and White (1992) do, that excellence theory is continually evolving, and by no means is J. E. Grunig's (1992a) work the final say on the matter, despite being the seminal work on the theory. A major reason for revisions to excellence theory has been the growing number criticisms about the validity and reliability of the theory, many of which J. E. Grunig (2001) has responded to only vaguely, citing a few studies from the mid-1990s to defend his position; he has, however, addressed a few criticisms more specifically. As for why criticisms of excellence theory arose in the first place, J. E. Grunig (2001) cites – and probably accurately – the following:

> Some scholars have reacted negatively to the suggestion that the symmetrical model is normatively superior to the others because they believe that one or more of the other models represent acceptable public relations practice. […] Other theorists accept public relations as a legitimate profession but have maintained that symmetrical public relations is a utopian ideal that cannot be practiced in reality. (p. 13)

J. E. Grunig (2001) distances excellence theory from utopianism, stating that "symmetrical public relations does not take place in an ideal situation where competing interests come together with goodwill to resolve their differences" (p. 18). Still, the charge that two-way symmetrical public relations – and by extension excellence theory – lacks positive value has haunted excellence theorists since the theory's inception.

When speaking of the original excellence project as culminated in *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, J. E. Grunig (2006) asserts that the findings "suggested that the relationship among the models of public relations and […] organizational

variables was normative rather than positive" (p. 156). Still, J. E. Grunig (2006) believes and paradoxically asserts that the two-way symmetrical model is positive and applicable, claiming that excellence theory "prescribes techniques that public relations managers can use to fulfill their role in strategic management" (p. 154).

Assuming that excellence theory does have a positive value, many scholars – most notably those advocating contingency theory[7] – point to two-way symmetrical public relations as an entirely accommodative practice. In developing excellence theory, J. E. Grunig (2001) "never viewed the two-way symmetrical model as one of pure cooperation or of total accommodation of a public's interests. […] Total accommodation of the public's interests would be as asymmetrical as unbridled advocacy of the organization's interests" (pp. 12, 15).

While this intention may be true, one must be leery of committing an intentional fallacy when interpreting excellence theory. There is no guarantee that what a theorist wishes to be will come to pass. Consider the realm of literature for comparative purposes. There are numerous exemplary cases in which an author's intentions never culminated in the desired consequences of their works. For instance, Upton Sinclair wrote an inspiring novel entitled *The Jungle*, which he intended to galvanize the spirits of the downtrodden proletariat, to highlight the exploitation of American workers, and to legitimize a socialist political agenda. Instead, the most meaningful change came from Sinclair's accurate and appalling description of the meat-packing business, which led directly to reform within that industry (Sullivan, 1996). Sinclair's political point was largely overshadowed.

In the case of excellence theory, the real criticism, then, is whether positively practiced two-way symmetrical communication *is* accommodative, not whether it was meant to be. In either case, J. E. Grunig (2001) does not view two-way symmetrical public relations as pure

[7] Contingency theory is an alternative theory of public relations which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 8.

accommodation, but rather as "collaborative advocacy" or "cooperative antagonism," in which two-way symmetrical practice equates to "balancing self-interest with the interests of others in a give-and-take process that can waver between advocacy and collaboration" (p. 28). This middle ground stance between advocacy – typically associated with the two-way asymmetric model – and collaboration – typically associated with the two-way symmetric model – harkens back to Murphy's (1991) mixed-motive model, which J. E. Grunig (1992b) co-opted.

From this point of view, excellent communication appears to hover between collaboration and persuasion-based advocacy. As illustrated earlier, excellence theory generally has opposed the latter as a credible tactic. However, in later conceptions of excellence theory, J. E. Grunig (2001) appears to have softened the excellence stance, redefining symmetry to include some level of persuasion:

> Symmetry means that communicators keep their eyes on a broader professional perspective of balancing private and public interests. Their job consists of more than argument or a 'wrangle in the marketplace.' They must listen as well as argue. This does not mean, however, that they do not argue or attempt to persuade. Rather, they must consistently remind themselves and management that they might not be right and, indeed, that their organizations might be better off if they listen to others. (p. 28)

On the other end of J. E. Grunig's (2001) prescribed continuum is collaboration, and given the uneasiness excellence theorists have historically held concerning asymmetric-like tactics such as persuasion, collaboration emerges as a favored alternative. However, several critics – Leichty (1997) being the most notable – have pointed to the numerous problems of

collaboration.[8] In fact, J. E. Grunig (2001) has ceded some ground on this matter, agreeing that "there are limits to collaboration" (p. 14).

Initially, J. E. Grunig (2001) appears to have primarily blamed organizations for the collaborative failures that exist between organizations and their publics. Interestingly, on the point of persuasion, excellence theorists have acknowledged that "if persuasion occurs, the public should be just as likely to persuade the organization's management to change attitudes or behavior as the organization is likely to change the publics' attitudes or behavior" (J. E. Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 23; J. E. Grunig, 2001, p. 13). Given the dual ability and responsibility shared by organizations and publics that exists within excellent relationships, it would stand to reason that collaboration – opposite persuasion on J. E. Grunig's (2001) continuum – would be a symbiotic function in much the same way persuasion is. From this point of view, publics and organizations would share equal blame for failing to collaborate. Indeed excellence theorists share this understanding, as J. E. Grunig (2006) believes "it is necessary to acknowledge that publics often are not willing to collaborate with organizations and often behave in ways that are destructive to the relationship and society in general" (p. 168).

The inability to create collaboration or compromise between some organizations and their publics becomes a major concern for excellence theorists, as two-way symmetric public relations is meant to achieve those goals. Just as later conceptions of excellence theory sanction the use of persuasion in some cases, J. E. Grunig (2001) sanctions the use of other asymmetric tactics to accomplish meaningful "symmetric" ends:

> Depending on the situation, asymmetrical tactics sometimes may be used to gain the best position for organizations within the win-win zone. Because such practices are bounded

[8] The collaborative limits of excellence theory will be explained in greater detail in Chapter 7. For the immediate purposes of this chapter, such a lengthy discussion is not warranted.

> by a *symmetrical worldview* [italics added] that respects the integrity of long-term relationships, the two-way model is essentially symmetrical. (p. 26)

While these later adjustments to a worldview focus as opposed to a tactics focus provide an increasing number of communication tools to practitioners who wish to adhere to the excellence model, they also blur the lines between two-way symmetric public relations and the three asymmetric models. J. E. Grunig (2001) seems to advocate for an understanding of two-way symmetrical public relations as synonymous to the worldview J. E. Grunig and White (1992) described earlier, where tactics – be they symmetric or asymmetric – that fit into the tenets of that worldview are ultimately considered part of a symmetric and thus excellent practice. Again, however, there is the problem of intentional fallacy, in which theorists intend to realign excellence with a given worldview while many practitioners and scholars continue to understand excellence in terms of tactics.

The wider worldview focus is appealing for excellence theorists as it widens their ideology to surpass many of these initial criticisms and broadens the model to make it more germane. Still, in the same breath that J. E. Grunig (2001) develops this apparently more applicable understanding of two-way symmetry, he answers charges against his best-practice excellence model in a somewhat humble manner: "I never have believed, or said, that the symmetrical model always would be successful" (p. 14). It is safe to assume that here, J. E. Grunig (2001) is referring to the limits of two-way symmetrical *tactics* rather than the two-way symmetrical *worldview*, and like other communication scholars, he appears to find it difficult to conceive of excellence theory without a privileging of the two-way symmetrical model, and more specifically two-way symmetrical tactics, for the model is synonymous with the tactics, not the prescribed worldview.

Needless to say, identifying both a theoretical worldview and the tactics that comprise it with the same two-way symmetrical label is confusing, but it appears that the tactics trump the worldview in forming the cornerstone of excellence theory. That said, J. E. Grunig's (2001) sanctioning of asymmetric tactics would appear to mark a return to the contingency approach J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) first employed. In fact, J. E. Grunig's (2001) findings might suggest that such a return is merited:

> Excellent public relations departments seem to center their practice on the two-way symmetrical and asymmetrical models, but they also have the knowledge to perform the two one-way models. They do not seem to exclude those models from their practice. (p. 24)

Though J. E. Grunig (2001) implicitly states that excellent public relations departments employ all four models of public relations – which is a rudimentary version of contingency theory's claims – neither he nor any other excellence theorists appear to be reverting back to the original conception of their theory. Excellence theory remains a best-practice model favoring the use of two-way symmetrical tactics over asymmetrical tactics.

Perhaps this stance remains unchanged because competing contingency theorists have gained control of the opposite position, or perhaps excellence theorists believe there is enough evidence to maintain their current position. In either case, excellence theory, the most dominant theory of public relations, has faced constant scrutiny and criticisms, the answers to which have been – as the reader can plainly see – confusing and paradoxical, often provoking more questions than providing more answers. Whether correct in its current conception or not, a complete critical evaluation of excellence theory is in order.

CHAPTER 4

THE OBSERVABLE BASIS FOR A NEEDED CRITIQUE

The Development of Excellence Theory and the Flaws of the Best Practice Model

As Murphy (2000) notes, "to one degree or another, all public relations theories concern themselves with change and uncertainty, but the emphasis they give to instability varies along a wide spectrum" (p. 448). Instability often leads to a freer range of practice, but it has been argued that such freedom leads to unethical practices. Excellence theorists oriented their ideology to the apparent stability of a best-practice model, which has generally been opposed by Holtzhausen's postmodern-based theories of public relations as well as the contingency approach championed by Cameron and his colleagues (Murphy, 2000).

It seems clear that J. E. Grunig (2001) and his associates have had a difficult time reconciling their best practice-model to a reality of public relations in which numerous tactics beyond the realm of two-way symmetry may have ethical applicability. The development of the best-practice excellence model *appears* to be a reasonable approach within the context of the changing climate of the public relations field – namely a decline in respect and credibility for the practice – but as the reader will see, appearances can be deceiving.

J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) describe public relations as an outgrowth of propaganda, citing practitioners such as P. T. Barnum and Samuel Adams as laying the groundwork for what would later become known as public relations. In many ways, the image of the lying flack or diabolical spin doctor are more often associated with public relations than is the more respectable and far more common image of the responsible practitioner.

In attempting to move beyond this negative conception of public relations, practitioners began to demonstrate value as effective media relations experts. Unfortunately, this led to a sort of typecasting of PR practitioners as providers of publicity rather than managers of relationships, both of which are needed and useful skills (Ehling, White, and J. E. Grunig, 1992). Now a new challenge of representing public relations as more than media relations – as well as more than mere propaganda – presents itself for all those with a stake in the public relations field. Practitioners, CEOs, and the dominant coalition as a whole must realize the broad value public relations has and the value it can add to an organization (J. E. Grunig and Repper, 1992). As importantly, the value that public relations adds must be understood on its own terms of relationship building and communication management, not simply as the bottom line, product pushing value represented most commonly by marketing, a value with which the dominant coalition is often far more familiar and which it prefers (Ehling, White, J. E. Grunig, 1992).

While excellence theorists have made a noble and needed effort to conceptualize public relations as more than just publicity, media relations, and a bottom line marketing function, the fact that public relations is all those things (and more) has been lost in the fray. Media relations and publicity are very much a part of the day to day practice of public relations professionals. The situational theory of publics provides a guideline for generating awareness through media campaigns. More importantly, "journalists rely more heavily on public relations materials today due to financial pressure effecting news organizations" (Bronstein, 2006, p. 72). The efforts of public relations practitioners account for an estimated 25% to 40% of news content, and given the important function of journalism in Western democracy, public relations – and more specifically media relations – becomes vitally important by proxy (Bronstein, 2006).

Just as public relations practitioners aid journalists, journalists aid the organizations served by these PR/media relations experts. An important part of delivering a message is doing so with credibility. People tend to have faith in sources that are likeable, trustworthy, and considered experts on the issue at hand (Kotler, 1976). Advertising is a prevalent means of message dissemination, but the goals of profit and the clear organizational allegiance creates declined credibility. PR practitioners, however, by effectively employing media relations to filter information through more credible sources – i.e., journalists – often create a more effective message. In addition to potential benefits of efficacy, there are benefits of financial efficiency, as PR practices are generally more cost effective than their advertising counterparts (Ehling, White, and J. E. Grunig, 1992).

Although excellence scholars often seem to fear directly attaching public relations to a bottom line measurement, the reality is that the field – like marketing – must demonstrate the ability to *directly* enhance an organization's bottom line. The reluctance to accept this reality likely hinges on issues of tangibility. Marketers are traditionally viewed as adding to the bottom line by promoting sales of tangible products, but just as important, marketers and practitioners of similar communications fields must demonstrate the added value of their services, most of which are intangible (Kotler, 1976). This certainly seems to be the case for public relations.

Excellence theorists still seem uneasy about such a proposition. In an example in which the media relations efforts of public relations practitioners allegedly helped sell thousands of cars – more specifically Acuras – Ehling, White, and J. E. Grunig (1992) argued the following:

> Clearly what is being said is that media coverage (treated as the cause) was responsible in a most helpful way for car sales (the effect). However, it is wholly unclear what is meant by helped sell. What, for example, was the magnitude of this help – the sale of 2 cars, 22

> cars, or 2,000 cars. [sic] The reader is left to guess – not only about the actual amount of help (if, in fact, there was any help at all), but also about the method, short of clairvoyance, used to find out about the type and extent of this help. (pp. 371-372)

What is interesting about this example is that it is used as an argument against holding public relations accountable to the bottom line in a manner similar to those used in marketing. However, Ehling, White, and J. E. Grunig's (1992) case is more of an argument against the ineffective measures used to gauge the success of public relations' contribution to the bottom line than an argument that public relations should not be accountable for some contribution.

Major disconnects and non sequitur arguments also abound in the reasoning for excellence theorists' choice of the two-way symmetrical best practice model. Typically these arguments are based in legitimate fears: "Like the law or medicine, the profession of public relations provides knowledge and tools that, when used by antisocial groups, can be dangerous and damaging to society" (J. E. Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 5). By itself, this statement is completely true. Certain tools – asymmetric practices according to excellence theorists – can create undesirable consequences and should thus be avoided, or so goes the argument.

But J. E. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) argument is not truly one against asymmetric public relations tactics, but rather an argument against their misuse. For example, a brick is a tool that could be misused (to break glass, to assault people, etc.) and somewhat commonly is, but a brick is also an incredibly durable and reliable building material when used properly. Simply because a tool can be misused is no reason to prohibit the use of that tool entirely, especially if it can be used in an effective and socially desirable manner.

The same is true for asymmetric public relations tactics. There is absolutely no question that these tactics can be abused, resulting in undesirable consequences, but the goal of public

relations as a field should be to prohibit the abuse of such tactics, not their use entirely, as these tactics can also serve socially desirable ends.

Excellent Hostility and Negative Evidence

Still, a problem with a single correct solution is in some ways more desirable than a problem with several pathways to rightness. The two-way symmetrical best-practice model presented by excellence theorists provides that one right answer, and that simplicity is appealing. Nevertheless, when developing an understanding of public relations, "it is more important that our theory fit the facts than that it be simple" (Ross, 1930, p. 319). Given the complex nature of public relations, this seemingly simpler best-practice model actually yields great difficulty, for advancing the two-way symmetrical model as the only pathway to success completely negates viable asymmetric tactics, making the job of PR practitioners much harder.

In light of emerging doubts about excellence theory, particularly the two-way symmetrical best-practice concept, excellence theorists – J. E. Grunig chief among them – have become increasingly defensive about their model, oftentimes without providing solid reasoning as to why their viewpoint should prevail.

In general, excellence theorists have been dismissive of the asymmetric models of public relations, arguing practitioners of these models "try to make the organization look good either through propaganda (press agentry) or by disseminating only favorable information (public information)" (J. E. Grunig, 1992b, p. 18). Again, however, the reader sees an oversimplified, negatively represented, and abuse-focused understanding of these models. Press agentry is ethically dubious not because of its publicity goal, but because press agents generally lack respect for the truth. Should truthful information be presented in order to gain publicity, the argument against the use of this tactic is weakened significantly.

Additionally, the claim that public information practitioners only disseminate favorable information is false. Public relations practitioners have been known to engage in disseminating unfavorable information about their organizations, most significantly by "stealing thunder," which "involves disclosing potentially negative information concerning the [organization] before it is acquired or released by another entity" (Arpan and Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005, p. 426); this practice often limits the magnitude of a would-be crisis.

Moreover, the decision to withhold damaging information is not necessarily an unethical one. Numerous variables can shift the boundary between simply withholding information and lying by omission, including the relevance of the information to given publics, the severity of the negative consequences for publics who remain unaware, and the ability of an organization to resolve an issue discretely without harm to the general public.

It seems apparent that the ultimate correctness of the excellent approach is at least in question and merits greater discussion. With this in mind, the more disturbing development is not the dismissive nature of excellence theorists toward asymmetric tactics, but the level of absolute certainty excellence theorists display in defense of their ideas. J. E. Grunig (2006) apparently believes that any discussion about the fallibility of the symmetrical approach should be closed:

> Although there is still a great deal of *naysaying* [italics added] in the public relations literature about the symmetrical idea, there is so much logical, empirical, and ethical support for it after 20 years of research and theoretical development that its value seems *axiomatic* [italics added] to me. (pp. 156-157)

As J. E. Grunig and White (1992) argue, regarding any communication act that makes an implicit – that is *axiomatic* – claim to truth, "the communicator should support that claim to truth by *providing grounds or reasons*" (p. 12). While J. E. Grunig (2006) references two decades of

research that support the excellence stance, it remains scientifically irresponsible to completely disregard competing theories, as they have reasoned and empirical evidence on their sides as well. It is as though J. E. Grunig (2006) wishes to treat the tenets of excellence theory as social scientific laws, evidenced by overwhelming and virtually unquestionable support, when at best they constitute empirical generalizations that, despite having some degree of empirical support, are far from certainties (Reynolds, 1971).

What is most ironic about these axiomatic claims by J. E. Grunig (2006) is that they undermine the early grounds on which he and others developed excellence theory, namely challenging the academic status quo:

> In the past, scholars of organizational communication often have acted like religious fanatics: They took an item of faith – the value of communications – and religiously promoted it as the solution to all problems […] or diligently searched for evidence that their faith was indeed true. (J. E. Grunig, 1992b, p. 548)

Excellence theorists appear to believe that emerging PR theories, particularly contingency theory, threaten the existence of excellence theory in much the same way that axiomatic claims about the "truth" of excellence theory threaten competing ideas. J. E. Grunig (2006) stresses that "it is not necessary […] to destroy this edifice [excellence theory] to justify the value of another edifice" (p. 153). This statement is true in that theories should assert themselves on their own merits, not the shortcomings of other theories. However, some ideas are incompatible, and advancing one idea's applicability necessarily results in a devaluing of the other.[9] For example, for a contingency-based approach that employs both asymmetrical and symmetrical public relations tactics to take hold, the cornerstone of excellence theory – namely

[9] Such devaluing must only be done if empirical evidence exists to mount a valid critique and the subsequent dismissal of an opposing idea. Claims of intrinsic value are no basis for eliminating an idea from the intellectual marketplace.

the privileging of the two-way symmetrical model over other tactics – must be combated directly.

Devaluing a competing approach serves only to point out that theory's shortcomings; this tactic does nothing to add validity to one's own theory. Strangely, early excellence theorists employed this negative evidence approach, citing the apparent failure of asymmetric practices as proof of the success of the two-way symmetric approach. For example, L. A. Grunig (1992a) stated the following:

> The three most typical models of public relations used – press agentry, public information, and two-way asymmetrical – seemed ineffective. Because so few practitioners relied on the fourth model of public relations, two-way symmetrical, we cannot establish yet that this approach would have been more efficacious. (p. 525)

Also, there is the following statement from J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992):

> Although L. Grunig (1986) found that none of the 31 organizations she studied had used the two-way symmetrical model to deal with activist groups, she also found that none of the other models reduced conflict with these groups. (pp. 308-309)

And finally, consider this statement by J. E. Grunig (2001):

> In short, the two-way symmetrical model sometimes will be less effective than it will at other times. The major question, then, is whether an asymmetrical approach will be more successful when a symmetrical approach is not completely effective. (p. 15)

On the face of it, these three arguments appear to support the excellence claim that two-way symmetrical public relations is the most effective method of practice. In reality, each of these claims merely casts doubt on the validity of asymmetrical practices. It seems as though these theorists operate under a rigid syllogism:

- Public relations is an effective organizational endeavor.
- Public relations is practiced using one of four models.
- Three of those models fail to produce effective outcomes.
- The fourth (the two-way symmetrical model) must therefore be effective.

This logic rests on the unproven assumptions that public relations continually yields measurably effective results and that the four excellence theory models capture the entire realm of public relations practice.

What has occurred, then, is a shifting of the burden of proof to the critics of excellence theory. Excellence theorists no longer need to provide evidence that their theory is true; rather, the theory is axiomatically assumed to be true unless critics provide convincing evidence to the contrary as well as a better theoretical approach. As J. E. Grunig (2001) explicitly states: "In a professional field such as public relations, I believe, scholars must go beyond criticizing theories; they also have the obligation to replace theories with something better – an obligation that many critical scholars do not fulfill" (p. 15).

It is worth stressing, again, that the invalidity of one theory – or in some cases the lack of a viable alternative theory – is not proof of the validity of a competing theory. Whether contingency theory or any other public relations theory can serve as a replacement for excellence theory is a poor measure of excellence theory's value. Standards, both objective and those set by excellence theorists themselves, provide a better benchmark for measuring the validity of excellence theory.

Precedents for Critique and Refutation

Any theory can be criticized for failing the standards it sets for itself or by failing to meet generally agreed upon objective standards. Excellence theorists understood this, as well as the

value of posing critical questions, when they developed excellence theory. Perhaps J. E. Grunig (1992b) states it best in the first chapter of *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*:

> We do not accept public relations as it is currently practiced as 'the way public relations is' or the way it must be practiced. If we did, a study of excellence would be meaningless. We look at public relations as a profession and a function in society as something that can be constantly improved. (p. 10)

Just as scholars questioned established practice to develop excellence theory, so too must today's academics question excellence theory to advance the field further.

Theoretically, challenging – and potentially debunking – a dominant ideology such as excellence theory is a relatively simple prospect. As J. E. Grunig (2006) describes of theories:

> If they cannot solve a puzzle in the way that the paradigm predicts, the puzzle becomes an 'anomaly.' If researchers repeatedly cannot solve this anomaly, a scientific revolution occurs, and the paradigm is discarded and replaced by a new one. (p. 152).

In reality, however, criticizing and refuting a theory – though based upon these simple guidelines – is far more complicated. Conclusively disproving a theory is a daunting task. A single anomaly is not enough to discredit a theory; instead it merely casts doubt. Anomalies also lead to modifications, which can be extensive, ongoing, and often used to increase the shelf life of a theory – which has certainly been the case for excellence theory. Additionally, some theories continue to develop in spite of refutation, usually because a core number of believers carry on the work regardless (Anderson, 1983). Finally, some theorists simply become too vested in their theories to abandon them. As Reynolds (1971) explains:

> When a theory has failed to be supported by empirical evidence, *it must be discarded or altered*. In a sense this is the hardest part of the procedure, for it takes a great deal of time and intellectual investment to develop a theory, and scientists tend to become ego-involved with *their* theories. (p. 145)

While theorists may be ego-involved, they must be open to questioning in order to grow and extend their theories. Such questioning must be done to advance knowledge and to reveal or develop an adequate model of public relations. When working with any model, however, one must bear in mind that models are "simplifications, and simplifications are always false in part, because they always leave something out" (J. E. Grunig and Hunt, 1984, p. 21). The questions, then, to ask of excellence theory are: "How much is missing from the model?" and "Is that missing amount part of a simplification that is acceptable to PR scholars and practitioners?"

Apart from the very general guidelines by which any theory is evaluated, "the theory itself defines what evidence should be used to 'prove' a theory" (J. E. Grunig, 2006, p. 152). In the case of excellence theory, its proponents have asserted it as a grand theory of public relations that promotes two-way symmetrical communication as a best-practice model for public relations because it is more effective and ethical than the three asymmetric models, these assertions being based on logical, empirical, and ethical evidence (J. E. Grunig, 2006). Should a reasonable number of these conditions – as well as general objective standards – be shown to be false or lacking, excellence theory must be discarded or reconceptualized as Reynolds (1971) states.

CHAPTER 5

THE THEORETICAL BASIS FOR CONDUCTING A CRITIQUE

The Theoretical Hierarchy

Understanding the various levels by which theories are categorized is important because J. E. Grunig (2006) argues that "the Excellence study offered the possibility of constructing a grand theory of the value of public relations" (p. 158). One must therefore conceive of a general theoretical hierarchy in order to evaluate this claim's validity.

General theories differ in their levels of abstractness. According to Reynolds (1971), "abstractness means that a concept is independent of a specific time or place" (p. 14). In other words, the more abstract the concepts upon which a theory is built, the more likely it is to hold true across varied instances and time periods.

Theories, therefore, exist in varying degrees of abstractness which have been illustrated using numerous typologies. For example, from most to least abstract, Reynolds (1971) describes three levels – Kuhn paradigms, paradigms, and paradigm variations – to provide some manner of categorization. The following typology used here is similar to Reynolds's (1971) conception, but it provides for four less esoteric levels of theory.

Grand theories – the realm in which excellence theorists *place* their theory – are the most abstract and provide the greatest level of analysis. Grand theories consist of closely interrelated propositions and abstract concepts that describe, explain, and predict the phenomena in question.

Just below grand theories on the scale of abstractness are theoretical models, also known as conceptual frameworks. These constructs provide loosely related sets of assumptions and propositions that comprise a particular worldview.

The next theoretical level, the middle range theory, focuses on one specific area of human experience, doing so via conceptual abstractions. Middle range theorists stress empirical data as a basis for theoretical construction.

Finally, there are substantive theories, which provide the least explanation of phenomena. Substantive theories consist of interrelated concepts that explain a particular phenomenon, but they are applicable only in a particular setting, during a particular time, and/or for a particular population (D. Krugman, personal communication, October 21, 2009; Reynolds, 1971; Baran and Davis, 2006).

Given this understanding of various levels of theory, excellence theory is most certainly not a grand theory, and for that matter, it would be rare to find any theory of public relations or communication that could meet that standard. Communication is a highly fluid process, as who communicates, what is communicated, and how information is communicated changes generationally at least, and probably more frequently than that. Public relations is no exception; cultural differences, varying situations, the introduction of new technologies, and numerous other variables make it nearly impossible for PR or communication theorists to achieve a level of abstractness necessary to construct a grand theory. There are simply too many anomalies that would arise with changing scenarios and the passage of time for PR theorists to create a time-tested, field-specific grand theory like Darwinians have done for evolutionary and biological sciences.

Considering these complexities, one would be hard pressed to consider excellence theory a failure simply because it fails to meet a likely unreachable standard – at least for communication theorists. Still, the claim that excellence theory meets the standards of a grand theory is fallacious. However, simply because excellence theory is not a grand theory does not mean that it is not a theory at all; the question appears to be one of fit.

The theoretical classification of excellence theory is certainly debatable, and this current project does not expect to resolve that debate. While excellence theory does seek to explain the limited area of organizational communication as mediated by public relations – a characteristic of a middle range theory – and places those communication acts in a specific idealized setting – a characteristic of a substantive theory – excellence theory appears to fit more of the criteria of a theoretical model than anything else.

By its own design, excellence theory constitutes a development of four *models* that seek to describe public relations practice. Moreover, in reading *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, there is no question that the concepts presented are interrelated, though at times they appear to be so only loosely – particularly the arguments focusing on diversity, PR education, and the relationship of marketing to public relations. Finally, J. E. Grunig and White (1992) clearly set forth an excellent *worldview* through which they intend excellence theory and practice to both operate and be understood – though the function of that worldview, particularly in relation to employing two-way symmetrical tactics, is confusing and at times unclear, as has already been discussed.

Considering all this information, it seems that the more important question is not whether excellence theory *is* a theory, but whether it is a *valid and applicable* theory. To determine the

truth of this dilemma, a deeper understanding of how theories are constructed and evaluated is needed.

Constructing Theories

According to Chaffee and Berger (1987), a theory is "a set of constructs that are linked together by relational statements that are internally consistent" (p. 101). The more abstract these constructs are, the greater the range of applicability a given theory will possess, grand theories being the most widely efficacious.

In general, theories are constructed in one of two manners: an inductive, theory-then-research approach or a deductive, research-then-theory approach. In describing the inductive method, Anderson (1983) states that "on this view, science begins with observations, and its theories are ultimately justified by the accumulations of further observations, which provide probabilistic support for its conclusions" (p. 19). Anderson (1983) describes the deductive approach in the following manner: "The scientific process begins when observations clash with existing theories or preconceptions. […] A theory is then proposed to solve the problem, and the logical consequences of the theory (hypotheses) are subjected to rigorous empirical tests" (p. 20). In the deductive approach, the role of any scientific endeavor is problem solving, for which theory is merely a vehicle.

By its very nature, a normative-based idea such as excellence theory must be developed inductively. Seeing as normative theories prescribe an ideal for how the world or a given practice within it should be, as opposed to most immediately describing the world or a given practice as it presently exists, it appears that there could be little observation-based research by which such a theory could be deductively built. On the other side, however, theories that present alternatives to

excellence theory, such as contingency theory, are often deductively constructed as they conceptualize a more pragmatic and less idealistic framework on which to build.

Whether constructed inductively or deductively, theories must adhere to certain standards. All theoretical constructs – no matter how abstract – must be operationally defined in an understandable and adequate manner. Theories must also contain boundary conditions that "specify the domain of events the theory explains, and what lies outside it" (Chaffee and Berger, 1987, p. 102).

Inadequate boundary conditions present a serious problem for excellence theory. The excellence claim of being a grand theory presupposes that excellence theory explains vast and numerous aspects of PR practice. Because this grand theory claim is suspect, it is probable that excellence theory adequately explains far fewer phenomena than it claims to. Indeed, the theory seems to have no boundaries, particularly seeing as excellence theorists co-opt competing and alternative theories into the domain of excellence, the two most notable cases being the mixed-motive model – "With this new model [mixed-motive] of combined two-way public relations, the difference between the mixed-motive and two-way symmetrical models disappears" (J. E. Grunig, 2001, p. 25) – and contingency theory:

> The contingency theory proposed by Cameron and his colleagues does not really challenge the symmetrical model. Rather, I see the theory as an elaboration of the symmetrical model. Symmetry in public relations really is about balancing the interests of organizations and publics, of balancing advocacy and accommodation. (J. E. Grunig, 2001, p. 16)

Excellence theory truly does seem to be limitless in its evolution, and this lack of boundary conditions is a theoretical weakness.

However, it is important to understand that theories are not all or nothing ventures. Few theories perfectly adhere to prescribed conditions. Moreover, some theoretical propositions will inevitably be flawed and some propositions of a given theory will be better supported than others; a few weak propositions do not provide sufficient reason to dismiss a theory. Serious problems arise only when numerous propositions lack logical or empirical support (Chaffee and Berger, 1987).

Finally, for all theorists, the goal is widespread acceptance of their ideas. According to Reynolds (1971), social scientific theories gain credence when individual scholars become more confident in a theory's claims and when an increasing number of scholars find a theory useful. Excellence theory's rise to dominance certainly followed this pattern, but the unraveling of a theory often occurs when the process Reynolds (1971) describes reverses itself as scholars lose confidence in a theory's claims and continually find them less useful.

From this standpoint, the efficacy of a theory is outside the theorists' hands, and the evaluation from academic peers becomes exceedingly important. In much the same way, these peers are necessary for evaluating the completeness of a theory. As Reynolds (1971) asserts, "it is necessary for him [the theorist] to seek his colleagues' evaluations of his efforts in order to determine if he has developed a complete theory" (p. 110).

The value of all theories concerning both efficacy and completeness are determined not by the original theorists alone, but by the field-specific scientific community. In a sense, social scientific theories are considered complete and useful only in a subjective manner. Similarly, the evaluation of a theory as valid, reliable, and efficacious is often beyond the realm of theorists as well; the major difference is that objective standards of theoretical evaluation for these claims do exist.

Evaluating Theories

As Reynolds (1971) points out, "the ultimate test of any idea is its utility in achieving the goals of science" (p. 3), namely to describe, explain, and predict phenomena within the settings they occur. To that end, "the most important criterion for evaluating the usefulness of any statement for the purposes of science is the degree of correspondence between the statement and the results of empirical research" (Reynolds, 1971, p. 115). In other words, theories have value only insofar as they match the objective reality that they seek to clarify and classify.

Before discussing more general attributes of good theories, two common and large problem areas for theories merit a brief word here, as excellence theory suffers from both. First is the issue of a non-refuting anomaly, or "a problem which has not been solved by the theory under consideration, but which has been solved by a rival theory" (Anderson, 1983, p. 23). Unfortunately for proponents of excellence theory, contingency theory fills many of the gaps that exist within excellence theory: while excellence theory is predominately normative and thus suffers from problems of applicability, contingency theory hinges on a more positive approach; the introduction of an accommodation/advocacy continuum by contingency theorists solves many issues that arise from the best-practice model of excellence theory; contingency theory provides several alternative practices for PR professionals when dialogue fails, an area in which excellence theory falters; and contingency theory also accounts for cultural differences in PR practice more adequately than does excellence theory.[10]

In addition to these non-refuting anomalies, excellence theory suffers from major conceptual problems, which can "include logical inconsistencies within the theory itself, as well as inconsistencies between the theory under consideration and other scientific theories or

[10] Each of these strengths of contingency theory and the comparative weaknesses of excellence theory will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters 8, 9, and 10.

doctrines" (Anderson, 1983, p. 23). Clashing ideologies between excellence theory and accepted conceptions of power and exchange, as well as several internal inconsistencies within the theory itself, are major drawbacks for excellence theory.

Beyond these issues, there are more general measures to consider. What follows is a list of nine general attributes of good theories compiled from ideas presented by Reynolds (1971), Anderson (1983), and Chaffee and Berger (1987), and an explanation of how well excellence theory adheres to these standards.

The first criterion of a good theory is explanatory power, or the "ability to provide plausible explanations for the phenomena it was constructed to explain" (Chaffee and Berger, 1987, p. 104).

Second is predictive power, which Chaffee and Berger (1987) describe as "measuring the theory's ability to predict events" (p. 104).

Third is the issue of parsimony. As Chaffee and Berger (1987) explain, "the complexity of a theory is directly related to the complexity of the reality it seeks to explain" (p. 104). In other words, the more complex the reality, the more complex the theory. More generally speaking, parsimonious theorists often employ techniques like Occam's razor to simplify the explanation of a given phenomenon as much as possible.

Fourth is the issue of falsifiability. A theory is only valid insofar as it can empirically be proven false (Chaffee and Berger, 1987). Similarly, as Anderson (1983) puts it "statements or propositions are meaningful only if they can be empirically verified" (p. 19).

Fifth is the issue of internal consistency. According to Chaffee and Berger (1987), "theoretical propositions should be consistent with each other. If they are not, empirical findings may be difficult to interpret within the theory" (p. 104).

Sixth, one must consider a theory's heuristic provocativeness. A good theory must have the ability to generate new hypotheses either from the theorists who originally developed the ideas or from other scholars (Chaffee and Berger, 1987).

Seventh is the quality of a theory's organizing power, or its ability to create a useful typology. Good theories must provide adequate organization for existing knowledge (Chaffee and Berger, 1987).

Eighth, a good theory must provide some sense of understanding. According to Reynolds (1971), providing understanding typically results in adequately describing causal links among variables.

Finally, the ninth attribute is control. Good theories provide an understanding of how control of phenomena in question could be achieved. This does not mean, however, that such a method of control must be capable of being carried out, for the methods of control for some phenomena – such as those responsible for Darwinian evolution – are sometimes beyond human or societal control (Reynolds, 1971).

While these standards are relatively objective, most are measured in terms of degree, and what is considered "adequate" is often subjective. However, sound arguments can be made and accepted regarding both the adequacy and inadequacy of excellence theory based upon these criteria.

Excellence theory unquestionably meets many of these criteria. For example, excellence theorists have created a vast nomenclature to organize existing phenomena into an understandable typology. They have no doubt shaped the way in which PR scholars speak about their field.

Additionally, excellence theory scores well on the measures of control and the ability to provide a sense of understanding. Though some might argue that excellence theory's description of links between certain variables is incorrect, it is nonetheless thorough enough to create understanding.

Also, there is no question that excellence theory has heuristic provocativeness. The number of books, book chapters, journal articles, and other works written directly about or influenced by excellence theory are exceedingly vast in number – and this current discussion is among them.

Parsimony presents a possible problem for excellence theory given the complexity of the communication and public relations fields as well as the desire of excellence theorists to create a grand theory using a relatively simple model. However, excellence theory has continually searched for ways to explain public relations in its simplest terms using general rules and guidelines, so excellence theory appears – at least prima facie – to be parsimonious.

Like the attribute of parsimony, the falsifiability criterion may at first seem less adequately met by excellence theory than it actually is. J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992) provided a summary of reliability numbers that critics, most notably Leichty and Springston (1993), have argued to be insufficient and unreliable. These same critics also provide evidence that validity and reliability tests by excellence theorists do not support the conception of the four models of public relations. While it seems true that excellence theorists have ignored these charges, or at the very most have addressed them only vaguely, this does not provide evidence against falsifiability; rather, it is an argument that excellence theory is falsifiable and that excellence theorists have not reasonably attended to the existing evidence that refutes their theory.

To this point, excellence theory appears sound on six of the nine criteria; however, the theory suffers greatly from problems concerning explanatory power, predictive power, and internal consistency.

As was discussed earlier – and will be elaborated upon later in greater detail – empirical evidence for excellence theory is weak. For example, the reliability scales presented by J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992) feature low alpha scores, and the fractionation scale used to raise those numbers has problems of its own that will be elaborated upon in the following chapter. Moreover, despite the introduction of this scale, the reliability scales for the four models still failed to meet the standard threshold for acceptance.

The predictive power of excellence theory is also questionable. Perhaps the greatest concern is whether the normatively conceived theory can be positively applied. Moreover, the prediction that two-way symmetrical communication will consistently yield positive and ethical results through dialogic communication has also been sharply and poignantly criticized (Cameron, 1997; Cancel, Cameron, Mitrook, and Sallot, 1997; Cancel, Mitrook, and Cameron, 1999; Roper, 2005).

Finally, excellence theory lacks internal consistency on several points, perhaps because its development has been pioneered by numerous individuals over nearly a three-decade-long span. Shifting definitions of what constitutes excellence theory, and more specifically two-way symmetrical communication – particularly theorists' changing attitudes toward persuasion, advocacy, collaboration, and compromise – have led to immense confusion and an understanding of excellence theory that is somewhat circular in its definition.

Confidence in the Face of Data

Despite these glaring foundational problems, excellence theory has trudged forward in the face of criticisms and refutations – just as Anderson (1983) described – and continues to remain the dominant PR paradigm. Major reasons for this are the confident assertions by excellence theorists – particularly J. E. Grunig – that excellence theory is an efficacious, ethical, and all-around good theory that should be axiomatically accepted. However, based upon the relationships of empirical data and various theoretical propositions, this is clearly not the case.

In general, theoretical statements and propositions can be categorized in one of three ways: as a law, an empirical generalization, or a hypothesis. Reynolds (1971) describes each type in the following manner:

> A law is a statement that describes a relationship in which scientists have so much confidence they consider it an absolute 'truth.' […] Empirical generalizations are similar to laws except they do not have as wide acceptance as laws. […] 'Hypothesis' is generally used to refer to a statement selected for comparison against data collected in a concrete situation. (pp. 78, 79)

Again, according to Reynolds (1971), "the relationships of laws, empirical generalizations, and hypotheses to data is one of degree, not form" (p. 79): laws have overwhelming statistical support, empirical generalizations have some statistical support, and hypotheses have no statistical support.

J. E. Grunig, across numerous years and publications, has consistently treated the propositions of excellence theory as laws when – at best – they are empirical generalizations. The axiomatic status of excellence theory that J. E. Grunig (2006) claims is premature, for the

theory has been compellingly critiqued for its questionable assertions of validity, reliability, applicability, effectiveness, and ethicality.

CHAPTER 6

ISSUES OF VALIDITY, RELIABILITY, AND APPLICABILITY

Reliability Scales and Validity Problems

If excellence theory provides a valid description of public relations practice, one would expect the four PR models – the accepted cornerstone of the theory – to consistently and reliably describe the practice of public relations. However, even a rudimentary examination of J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig's (1992) summary of past findings shows that such reliability is noticeably absent:

> J. Grunig and L. Grunig (1989) reported Cronbach's Alpha for seven studies conducted at the University of Maryland using the models […]. Cronbach's Alpha in the seven studies was .62 for the press agentry index, .53 for public information, .57 for two-way asymmetrical, and .59 for two-way symmetrical. […] Ossareh (1987) simplified the instrument by selecting the three items from each index that were most reliable and obtained comparable alphas of .48, .57, .76, and .51 for the press agentry, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical models, respectively. […] Wetherell (1989) used […] an improved scaling technique also used in the excellence project – an open-end 'fractionation' scale – and found reliabilities of .78, .60, .81, and .76 for the models in the same order. In short, we have improved the reliability scores for the four models to the point where they are at or near the standard of .80 with the exception of the public information model. (p. 294)

This lengthy excerpt illustrates the efforts of excellence theorists to raise reliability scores for the four models. Particularly problematic is excellence theorists' implementation of a fractionation scale. Leichty and Springston (1993) provide a brief but pointed criticism of the fractionation scale method, as well as a better explanation of how a fractionation scale actually works:

> A fractionation scale has an open-ended format which allows the respondent to attach any magnitude to a particular attribute that they desire. […] The square root of this number is then used for actual data analysis. […] Providing respondents with open-ended scales allows ordinary social desirability bias extra room to operate. (pp. 329, 330)

Despite the potential introduction of social desirability bias from the use of a fractionation scale – this factor alone being enough to question and perhaps dismiss the findings – the reliability scores *still* do not meet the accepted standard. The final reliability numbers of .78, .60, .81, and .76 only *approach* the .80 threshold – with the exception of the two-way asymmetrical score of .81, which actually meets it. When J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992) claim these numbers as valid evidence of reliability, they ignore the very definition of what a threshold constitutes, namely an all-or-nothing benchmark. Water may *approach* freezing at 34°F, but it is not ice until it reaches 32°F. In much the same way, J. E. Grunig and L.A Grunig's (1992) numbers are measures of a phenomenon that is nearly reliable, or in other words, *un*reliable.

Beyond excellence theory's inability to reliably predict the differential use of the four models, there is also the problem of consistently distinguishing the models from one another to create truly unique constructs. Again, according to Leichty and Springston (1993), "one cannot conclude that the measures for press agentry and public information are measuring distinctively

different constructs. A similar judgment holds concerning the distinction between the two-way asymmetrical and the two-way symmetrical models" (p. 331). Rather than distinguishing four models based on the two axes of communication direction and level of symmetry, only the former distinction reliably holds. Therefore, it would seem that only two different models would exist – one-way and two-way – and that the distinction between asymmetry and symmetry is not empirically supported by data.

Though one might think such consistently negative evidence against a theory to be damning, excellence theory has continued to develop and become all-the-more utilized given ongoing assertions of positive applicability.

Applicability

For a theory to be applicable in a professional setting, it would have to be positive at some level, and has previously been noted, excellence theory appears to have a normative base. The most important questions, then, are whether excellence theory *could be* both normative and positive and whether excellence theory *is* both normative and positive.

> J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992) define normative theories in the following manner:
>
> A normative theory defines how things should be or how some activity should be carried out. […] In developing a normative theory, theorists have no obligation to show that an activity actually is conducted in the way the theory describes. […] The 'good in theory but not in practice' cliché is relevant to a normative theory. (p. 291)

As for positive theories, J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992) argue that "positive theories describe phenomena, events, or activities as they actually occur," and they "can be evaluated in part by whether they correspond to reality" (p. 291).

By the very definitions of normative and positive theories, it seems unlikely that a given theory would be both. In describing the way something *should* be in practice, one is implying that such a practice does not exist in reality, and if a given practice does not actually occur, it cannot be described as positive.

Though it is unlikely that excellence theory could be both normative and positive, it is certainly not impossible. However, given the inability of excellence theorists to reliably demonstrate the existence of the four models – even with the use of questionable statistical practices – coupled with Leichty and Springston's (1993) assertions that data from excellence research points to the existence of two rather than four models, it seems as though excellence theory is indeed not positive. In fact, J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992) themselves support this assertion:

> Although we think that organizations should practice two-way and symmetrical communication when their environments are complex and turbulent, many – if not most – organizations with such environments do not practice public relations in the way our theory predicted. We have concluded, therefore, that the theoretical relationship between the models of public relations and an organization's environment and structure is more normative than positive. (p. 298)

J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig's (1992) statement about the lack of use of two-way symmetrical communication, and by extension excellence theory, speaks strongly to the theory's failures of applicability. Moreover, this claim is not unique; before, during, and since the time of *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*'s publication, numerous scholars have made similar statements pointing out the underuse of excellent tactics:

- "Yet most of those who strongly advocate it also point out that symmetric communication is exceedingly rare in actual practice." (Murphy, 1991, p. 120)
- "Proof of not only the existence, but also the efficacy, of true symmetric communication has been hard to acquire." (Murphy, 1991, p. 120)
- "The two-way symmetrical model of public relations is rarest but most effective in contending with activist pressure." (L. A. Grunig, 1992a, p. 514)
- "The sixth assumption suggested that two-way communication would prove more effective than one-way efforts at dealing with activism. Perhaps that is so, but too few instances of two-way symmetrical communication were found to establish the validity of this assumption." (L. A. Grunig, 1992a, p. 524)
- "The two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical models did not show up as the dominant form of public relations in any of the studies." (J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig, 1992, p. 305)
- "Case studies documenting collaborative public relations in conflict situations are rather rare, compared to case studies in which a more confrontational approach has prevailed." (Leichty, 1997, pp. 47-48)
- "The majority of practitioners seem to have embraced advocacy as a primary function." (Fitzpatrick and Bronstein, 2006, p. ix)

Perhaps the reason for the two-way symmetrical model's rarity of use is not a misstep on the part of practitioners, but rather on the part of excellence theorists' assumption that two-way symmetrical tactics are always the most appropriate and effective responses.

False Expansions of Excellence Theory and the Creation of Circularity

All of the above quoted scholars point to the difficulty in finding two-way symmetric communication – as well as associated tactics such as accommodation and collaboration – in actual PR practice. Perhaps because of these failings, excellence theorists have attempted to broaden the theory to include more ideas, a process which has been difficult to navigate considering the unwavering attachment to the best-practice model.

The most common mode of expansion has been the co-opting of competing theories and their subsequent redefinition to include them in the excellence paradigm. The two most prominent examples are J. E. Grunig's (2001) appropriation of Murphy's (1991) mixed-motive model as well as the co-option of contingency theory in its entirety.

In reading *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management*, it is difficult to discern whether Murphy (1991) is a disciple of excellence theory or a critic of it. Excellence theorists present the former case when the latter sometimes appears to be a more accurate view. Murphy (1991) sought to create a more fluid conception of PR practice than excellence theory presents, arguing that "mixed motive equilibria do not necessarily exhibit rigid symmetry in the sense of a pure common-interest game" (p. 125), by which a pure common interest game refers to two-way symmetry.

Moreover, Murphy's (1991) mixed-motive model is conceptualized as a continuum between two-way asymmetry and two-way symmetry rather than the either/or conception excellence theory offers. While J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992) acknowledge that the level of symmetry of "organizations both internally and externally can be measured more by an infinite number of points" (p. 311) using Murphy's (1991) continuum, J. E. Grunig (1992) paradoxically argues that excellent use of the mixed-motive model will be "more symmetrical

than asymmetrical" (p.19). Limiting Murphy's (1991) continuum in such a manner equates the mixed-motive model to the two-way symmetric model, completely misrepresents Murphy's (1991) intention, and in fact renders her continuum useless, for what good is such a continuum if its full range – which would include the asymmetric – cannot be employed?

Similarly, J. E. Grunig (2001) briefly attempted to co-opt contingency theory, and early on there may have been a precedent for such action. Cameron (1997) did point out that his work is "not an alternative to the entire Excellence Theory. It is an elaboration and specification of one facet that hinges on the question of appropriate and effective accommodation of publics" (p. 29). However, the rigid best-practice approach excellence theorists employed toward two-way symmetrical and related practices created hostility between the two camps, evidenced clearly in Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, and Mitrook's (1997) presentation of contingency theory as an "*alternative* [italics added] to the normative theory of excellence in public relations" (p. 31). Later works by contingency theorists have upheld this separation, and attempts to reconcile excellence and contingency – such as the synthesis of the two theories posited by Szlemko and Christen (2007) – appear to have gained limited scholarly acceptance. Finally, excellence theorists, despite claiming contingency theory as their own, have displayed no real desire to return to the original contingent approach first proposed by J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984).

At best, these attempts to co-opt competing theories have been strategic failures; at worst, they represent an irresponsible and unethical misrepresentation not only of these competing theories, but of excellence theory as well. These constant shifts in definitional currents have muddied the waters, making it difficult to define precisely what excellence theory purports. The standards have changed both in revolutionary and evolutionary fashions, but at times excellence theorists seem to have reverted back to earlier conceptions.

There are numerous conceptions of what excellence theory represents, each varying depending on the source one consults. Given this climate of uncertainty, the seminal work, *Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management,* is probably the most complete and generally accepted authority on excellence theory. Still, even within this source there are problems of internal consistency.

For example, referring to earlier conceptions of excellence and effectiveness, J. E. Grunig (1992b) argues that creating organizational effectiveness through communication is the primary means for organizations – and more specifically their PR departments – to reach excellence. In this sense, effectiveness appears to be a necessary – though perhaps not sufficient – condition for excellence. In other words, effectiveness is an antecedent to excellence. Effectiveness, then, is generally understood as prioritizing and accomplishing organizational goals, a definition which is exceedingly straightforward (L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Ehling, 1992; Ehling and Dozier, 1992). These conceptions are accepted and generally well understood guidelines.

This *clear* understanding makes the following statement by J. E. Grunig (1992c) all the more *unclear*: "Excellence in general management – and in communication management – should make most organizations more effective, as we have defined effectiveness. But one set of measures cannot be used to measure effectiveness for every organization" (p. 223). As explained in the previous paragraph, excellence theorists conceive of organizational effectiveness as leading to organizational excellence; here, J. E. Grunig (1992c) reverses that conception and argues that organizational excellence leads to organizational effectiveness.

Setting that confusing reversal aside for the moment, there is the second part of the text to consider. While J. E. Grunig (1992c) notes that effectiveness lacks an objective means of

measurement, L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Ehling (1992), and Ehling and Dozier (1992), provide an objective measurement of effectiveness within the same book (J. E. Grunig, 1992a).

Now, instead of interpreting simple assertions, the reader of the seminal excellence theory text is left with a complex and confusing set of premises. If the reader assumes the most disheveled stance, excellence and effectiveness remain strong foundational parts of excellence theory; excellence and effectiveness are interrelated, but the nature of that relationship is ill-defined; and no objective understanding of effectiveness exists. Excellence theory would be so subjectively understood that it would have virtually no meaning, causing even the grandest of existentialists to blush in amazement. Indeed, the theory would begin to resemble the circular and unclear definition of public relations presented by J. E. Grunig and White (1992), in which public relations "can be defined as little more than 'what public relations people do'" (p. 32).

Although potentially true, the above presented scenario is meant to be hyperbolic, pointing the confusion and circularity to which excellence theorists have subjected their theory through constant revisions. Arguably these revisions were necessary to salvage some degree of validity, reliability, and applicability, though a great deal of evidence still shows much to be missing. It seems that excellence theorists fear that a further and more thorough redefinition would result in a paradigm shift that may subjugate excellence to a competing theory, most likely the emerging contingency theory. However, continuing the practice of such incomplete revisions that provide incomplete answers to criticisms while simultaneously clinging to outmoded ideas – particularly the best-practice approach – is likely to lead to greater confusion and circularity, as well as an understanding of excellent public relations as nothing more than what excellent public relations people do.

CHAPTER 7

ISSUES OF EFFECTIVENESS

Game Theory, Collaboration, and Compromise

Excellence theorists such as L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Ehling (1992) and Ehling and Dozier (1992) do put forth clear ways to avoid such circular perceptions of excellence theory, namely in their understanding of excellence as a representation of the most effective public relations model for achieving organizational goals. Provided excellence theory can demonstrate that it leads to organizational effectiveness, it will also show that the theory itself is efficacious. Problematically, however, there are numerous arguments to the contrary, most commonly based on the limits of the accommodative and collaborative approaches excellence theory represents.

Murphy's (1991) work on public relations as it relates to game theory – the same work that spawned the mixed-motive approach – is an early criticism of the overly accommodative and collaborative nature of excellence theory. Murphy (1991) used game theory to conceptualize public relations as an exercise in modeling strategic conflict within social relationships, arguing that, "like public relations, the theory of games focuses on the mediation of conflict, the establishment of an equilibrium among conflicting parties, the functions of power and domination, and questions of fairness and ethics" (p. 116).

In Murphy's (1991) view, social relationships are based on mutual adaptation and bargaining, and managing these relationships means finding a balance between conflict and

cooperation. Creating such a balance, however, is not necessarily the result of using two-way symmetrical collaboration or compromise as excellence theorists conceive (J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig, 1992). Instead, Conrad (1985) offers five orientations to conflict that could be used to restore this equilibrium. Murphy (1991) notes, collaboration and compromise as being among them, as are avoidance, competition, and accommodation.

The results of implementing one of Conrad's (1985) five strategies varies situationally, but according to Murphy (1991), any such strategy that leads to a closed system of exchanges will likely create a zero-sum game between conflicting parties, "one in which the payoffs to the players in any outcome add up to zero; what one player gains, the other must necessarily lose" (Colman, 1982, p. 47).

Though the zero-sum game approach may at first seem counterproductive, it is often a rational strategy for the more powerful player within a conflict to adopt, enabling that player to simultaneously strengthen his or her position by weakening that of his or her opponent. For this reason, zero-sum games are often the default approach unless players who employ the strategy are otherwise penalized, forcing them into a more symmetrical approach. For instance, according to Murphy (1991), "corporate communication strategy has of necessity become more symmetrical, as activists groups have managed to attach economic penalties to zero-sum behaviors" (p. 122).

In such instances, the two-way symmetrical approach is probably more effective given that it becomes an organization's only rational recourse. However, the levying of such economic penalties upon zero-sum behaviors is unlikely to occur if a large enough power differential separates organizations and publics. As Cancel et al. (1997) describe, "organizations are unlikely to practice public relations symmetrically until a public gains roughly equal power" (p. 47).

Moreover, it would logically seem that if this scenario were reversed – that is, if a given public exercised a great deal of power over an organization – a powerful public would be just as likely to forego symmetrical tactics in favor of a zero-sum game orientation, as this strategy maintains and increases the existing power differential. From either perspective, it would appear that the equilibrium and balance that Murphy (1991) describes rests on the fulcrum of power.

Typically, excellence theorists conceive of PR practitioners acting within nonzero-sum games and prescribe the use of collaboration and compromise to resolve conflict. However, conditions of power equality being more rare than excellence theorists admit, there are certainly times when Conrad's (1985) other tactics of conflict resolution–avoidance, competition, and accommodation – will be more efficacious, though not all of these tactics have expressed approval from excellence theorists.

In fact, there even appears to be some confusion on the issues of collaboration and compromise, most noticeably the difference between the two strategies and whether collaboration is actually the excellent result of two-way symmetrical communication. J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992) argue "two-way symmetrical public relations to be a process of collaboration" (p. 315), and they define collaboration as Conrad (1985) does: "all parties believing that they should actively and assertively seek a mutually acceptable solution and being willing to spend large amounts of time and energy to reach such an outcome" (p. 243).

Conrad (1985) also provides a bullet-point definition of compromise: "Searching for a resolution which satisfies both parties in part. In our society compromise generally means 'splitting the difference' on a fifty-fifty basis. Requires some degree of willingness to sacrifice goals, some communications, and some degree of assertiveness" (p. 243). This definition of

compromise seems to align with J. E. Grunig and White's (1992) understanding of excellent public relations more so than collaboration:

> We believe that excellent public relations departments adopt the more realistic view that public relations is a symmetrical process of compromise and negotiation and not a war for power. In the long run, the symmetrical view is more effective: Organizations get more of what they want when they give up some of what they want. (p. 39)

Excellence theorists have numerous reasons to prefer compromise over collaboration. Collaboration is a more difficult path to conflict resolution than compromise because, as Conrad (1985) notes, it requires a great deal of time and effort. The reason for such expenditures is that collaboration often means creating entirely new solutions to problems that are markedly different from the resolution proposals conflicting parties initially present.

Also, as Leichty (1997) points out, collaboration is not always possible or even desirable. Collaboration is incredibly difficult to enact under conditions of unevenly distributed power, which echoes ideas of reciprocity posited by J. E. Grunig and White (1992). Moreover, opposing parties sometimes have vested interests in avoiding collaboration because doing so could lead to enticing rewards such as media coverage. Finally, when parties have opposing goals and values, collaboration becomes virtually impossible, and a compromising approach of splitting the difference often substitutes for collaboration (Leichty, 1997).

Compromise is often easier to achieve than collaboration because it requires less patience, time, and effort. Compromise, though less desirable in its outcomes and less dialogically focused than collaboration, actually matches the current understanding of excellence theory quite well. For instance, J. E. Grunig (2001) conceives of a two-way symmetrical model

in which communication is a tool to move publics, the dominant coalition, or both into a mutually agreeable win-win zone.

Such movement clearly represent a compromised splitting of the difference, but the use of compromise is not necessarily a negative thing, as some conflicts may be best resolved using this strategy. However, excellence theorists have misrepresented this strategy as something more cooperative than it truly is, partly because of misdefinition.

Additionally, the very idea of meeting half way between two points of view implies that the conflict is operating within a closed system, as no new solutions are introduced. Such closed-system conflict is typical of zero-sum games, which are far more common than nonzero-sum games of pure cooperation, in which parties coordinate strategies with one another to create mutually preferred, collaborative outcomes (Murphy, 1991).

Given, therefore, that compromise typically occurs within a zero-sum game, one player's rewards are inevitably another player's costs, so each win is reciprocated with a loss. J. E. Grunig's (2001) understanding of two-way symmetrical public relation does result in the creation of win-win scenarios, but given the likelihood that this model plays out in a zero-sum game context, it is inevitably a lose-lose scenario as well.

Even according to J. E. Grunig (2001), compromise, by its very nature, necessarily entails an abandoning of values, beliefs, and ideals on some level. Moreover, as L. A. Grunig (1992a) illustrates, compromise always results in a loss for both parties, the only question being one of scale: "Even in clear instances of compromise, the extent to which each side [has] to concede might not be equal" (p. 523).

Again, conflict resolution of this type is not inherently bad, but it is most certainly not the outcome of a collaborative game of pure cooperation, which two-way symmetrical public

relations claims to present (Murphy, 1991). In truth, an organization does not get *more* of what it wants by sacrificing some of what it wants when conflict operates within such a closed system; rather, an organization can get *something else* it wants by sacrificing some of what it wants, bearing in mind that zero-sum games – like the laws of conservation of mass or energy – allow no additional factors to enter the system.

True win-win scenarios can only occur in games of pure cooperation, not those of zero-sum. Nonetheless, zero-sum tactics clearly display situational effectiveness, and the mere fact that asymmetrical approaches are effective in and of themselves debunks the excellence claim that two-way symmetrical public relations is the only path to effectiveness. It also casts doubts on the assertion that effectiveness is most efficiently established using two-way symmetrical approaches. Indeed, the rare use of two-way symmetrical tactics is reflected in Murphy's (1991) game theory approach as well.

Murphy (1991) aligns two-way symmetrical public relations with the concept of games of pure cooperation, a conception with which excellence theorists appear comfortable (J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig, 1992). While such games represent an appealing approach, Murphy (1991) argues that they are exceedingly rare in reality, which also appears to be the case with two-way symmetrical practice in general.

Two-way symmetrical games of pure cooperation also suffer from additional problems of effectiveness and ethicality. As Murphy (1991) states: "With its appeal to fairness, equality, and mutual understanding, the symmetrical model is clearly attractive. Yet from a game-theory standpoint, its ethical implications are much murkier" (p. 123).

Specifically, games of pure cooperation rarely have clear rational solutions; rather, they often work themselves out through custom or chance. Moreover, such games create spirals of

reciprocal expectations in which the best move of one player depends on the move of the other player, a prediction process that is all-the-more complicated as moves often occur in near simultaneity.

Such guessing often leads to inefficient outcomes for both parties, a common example of which is the *Gift of the Magi* scenario Murphy (1991) describes, in which a husband sells his watch to buy brushes for his wife's hair, while his wife in turn sells her hair to by a chain for her husband's watch. In trying to anticipate the other party's move to create a win-win situation, the husband and wife actually create a clear lose-lose scenario, similar to one that compromise might create in a zero-sum game – except the counterbalancing win-win condition is absent.

Finally, the spiral of reciprocal expectations can often lead to what Murphy (1991) dubs chaotic coorientation. In this process, opposing parties' constant attempts to coordinate with one another lead to a fixation on the status quo. The result, according to Murphy (1991), is that "symmetry tends to discourage innovation and encourage custom and tradition, even when both sides in a conflict would prefer to break with the status quo" (p. 124). In an instance such as this, two-way symmetry actually becomes not only a less effective approach, but also a less ethical one, sustaining the very exploitation it seeks to reduce.

It would seem, then, that it is not Murphy's (1991) support of two-way symmetry that leads her to create the mixed-motive model, but rather her disenchantment with it. According to Murphy (1991), the polarizing models employed by excellence theory force practitioners into either/or conceptions of public relations in which they fail to see useful solutions that exist between both sides of the advocacy/accommodation spectrum. Murphy's (1991) mixed-motive model conceives of public relations existing on a continuum between pure conflict zero-sum

games and pure symmetric coordination games, in which the interests of concerned parties are neither completely disregarded nor completely obeyed.

Murphy (1991) bases her model on bargaining between involved parties while strongly – though implicitly – criticizing the two-way symmetrical approach as one of pure accommodation:

> Mixed-motive players will try to gain as much advantage as possible given their power; they will yield points proportional to the power of their opposition. However, they will not give in to opponents simply because the opponents are there to be heard. (p. 127)

Problems of Accommodation and Persuasion as they Relate to Excellence

At times, however, Murphy (1996) is more explicit in characterizing two-way symmetrical public relations as purely accommodative:

> Organizations that practice Grunig's symmetrical communication attempt to adjust their own behavior to accommodate the beliefs and concerns of their publics. They assume that the organization and its publics are working jointly toward the same goals. […] The price paid, however, is that the organization accommodates whatever outcome may evolve over time. (p. 110)

Excellence theorists' initial and continued aversions toward advocacy and persuasion have led to a generally synonymous relationship between symmetry and accommodation. The apparent counter to these charges has been the confusing and ineffective tactic of separating the two-way symmetrical worldview from two-way symmetrical tactics, this strategy and its flaws having been discussed earlier. In relating advocacy and accommodation to the two-way symmetric worldview, J. E. Grunig and White (1992) state the following:

> Public relations also cannot be excellent if the schema for public relations in the organizations (the component of worldview related to public relations) conceives of public relations as asymmetrical, in a neutral or advocacy role, and solely technical in nature. (p. 55)

What this stance implies is that asymmetric tactics and models can be practiced within the context of the excellent worldview, or else the conception of such a worldview is irrelevant to conceptualizing two-way symmetry, as the practice will only be understood in terms of two-way symmetrical tactics. Murphy (2000) argues the latter, not just for excellence theory, but for the broader theoretical spectrum, claiming that "behavior, whether accommodative or manipulative, corporate or activist, [is] a form of local adaptation rather than an expression of long-term strategies or worldviews" (p. 455). In other words, the efficacy, ethicality, and intentionality of PR practitioners are reflected in their actions manifested in the situational implementation of tactics, not in a more encompassing framework.

Given that two-way symmetry is relegated to a primarily accommodative stance, it becomes important to ask whether this approach is consistently more ethical and effective than advocacy, for the value of excellence theory in part hinges on these questions. Leaving ethicality aside for the moment,[11] it would appear that there is some confusion about effectiveness and potential efficiency concerning the excellence stance toward accommodation, particularly in the case of the coorientation approach.

In speaking about coorientation, Dozier and Ehling (1992) argue that resulting "accuracy difference scores are relatively easy to reduce among members of the dominant coalition, because they are few in number and easily available to the communication manager" (p. 182). When two groups are diametrically opposed, changing the viewpoint of the minority group to

[11] For a complete discussion of the ethical implications of the excellence approach, please refer to Chapter 10.

match that of the majority public – the very definition of accommodation – seems, prima facie at least, to be more effective. Looking closer, however, the argument is that this practice is actually more efficient because it requires less effort to change fewer minds. Still, upon further inspection, accommodation of this manner is not necessarily efficient either, as efficiency entails expending a minimum amount of effort to produce *effectiveness*.

Who is to say that the position of the dominant coalition is incorrect? J. E. Grunig (2001) is right to say that an organization, or the few dominant individuals that control it, are acting paternalistically if they always assume their viewpoint to be correct and advocate for it unwaveringly. Regardless of this truth, however, "the organization's conviction that it operates in the public interest and that it knows more about the situation comes into play" (Cancel, Mitrook, and Cameron, 1999, p. 173). An organization's belief in its rightness can actually be a good thing considering that the minority view held by an organization may ultimately be the correct one. The argument for an accommodation-based approach, such as that of excellence theory, assumes that external publics hold a monopoly on the understanding of greater good, an equally paternalistic view.

Although J. E. Grunig (2001) has essentially made the same claim, continued skepticism from excellence theorists concerning the value of advocacy-based practices have limited two-way symmetrical public relations to the accommodative end of the spectrum, which perpetuates potential paternalism on the part of publics (Hon, 2006; Bowen, 2008).

Given the intense efforts of excellence theorists to prevent organizations from manipulating publics, it seems ironic that the manipulation of an organization by publics is not only of little concern to excellence theorists, but an approach they seem to condone. According to J. E. Grunig and Repper (1992), organizations "should feel a moral obligation to modify

[their] behavior" (p. 123) should it create negative consequences for publics. There are, however, instances in which negative consequences of organizational actions are vastly outweighed by the positive consequences, as well as instances when supposedly negative consequences are merely perceived as negative by a given public, but are in fact not negative at all. In these instances, advocacy on the part of an organization is not unethical, ineffective, or necessarily paternalistic, but rather a legitimate strategy.

In speaking toward similar issues, J. E. Grunig and Hunt (1984) argue that "the public should be just as likely to persuade the organization's management to change attitudes or behavior as the organization is likely to change the publics' attitudes or behavior" (p. 23), a position which J. E. Grunig (2001) maintains. This stance seems reasonable, as more diametrically opposed publics are increasingly less likely to persuade one another, a boundary that erodes with the emergence of common interests and goals. However, for this ideal to be realized, both accommodation and advocacy must be seen as equally viable strategies from a general standpoint, with one gaining superiority based on scenario-specific circumstances.

Still, advocacy remains largely a taboo practice for excellence theorists, again because of misunderstanding and misplaced fear. According to Bowen (2008), "practitioners who were in favor of public relations acting as an ethical conscience in the organization argued against the perspective of acting simply as an advocate" (p. 288). Yet again, the reader sees a reasoned stance. Some organizational goals are unethical in their ends, their means, or both; if this is the case, advocacy would be both unethical and ineffective. However, simply because advocacy-based approaches *can* be unethical and ineffective does not mean they inherently *are*. In the context of practitioner interviews, Bowen's (2008) argument reveals itself to be less a case against advocacy in general than an argument against *unethical* advocacy. Practitioners are – and

should be – leery of advocating for unscrupulous clients employing dubious tactics; but believing one should not *only* act as an advocate – a responsible position – is very different than believing one should *never* act as an advocate – an irresponsible position.

Moreover, public relations has historically been a practice not simply of accommodation, but rather one of advocacy and persuasion as well. According to Kotler (1976), "persuasive communication is said to take place when a communicator consciously develops his messages to have a calculated impact on the attitude and/or behavior of a target audience" (p. 323). The goal of all communication, whether accommodative or advocacy-based, is to create some calculated effect on an audience. Given this definitional similarity, the ability to change the minds and opinions of various publics is no more or less ethical, generally speaking, if one were to use accommodation or persuasive advocacy tactics.

Still, excellence theorists do not consider persuasion to be a valid or acceptable tactic for public relations practitioners (Ehling, 1992). If persuasion is removed from the mix, public relations loses all value, for what good is a communication practice that cannot change minds or behavior? Again, even accommodative behavior operates with this goal in mind. Moreover, the ability to practice public relations in any manner, including excellence, requires sanction from the dominant coalition (Sriramesh, J. E. Grunig, and Buffington, 1992; J. E. Grunig, 1992b; J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig, 1992). It seems rather evident that, for an organization to practice excellent public relations, it would have to engage in some level of persuasion to convince the dominant coalition that an excellent approach would be fruitful. However, if persuasion is a completely forbidden tactic, then applying excellence theory becomes a moot point.

Despite the attempts of excellence theorists to stifle the use of persuasion, public relations is an inherently persuasive enterprise (Hallahan, 2006). The excellence fear that persuasion can

be used for unethical ends is analogous to the excellence fear that advocacy can be potentially unethical. Both claims are completely true, and the ethicality of such actions should be a constant concern for the field, but the excellence response to these fears – namely the banning of these practices altogether – is incorrect and irresponsible.

Persuasion and advocacy are acceptable as long as they operate "within the boundaries of truth" (Seib, 2006, p. 157). Simply because communication tools can be misused does not make their use inherently unethical – or even probabilistically unethical. Rather, like most actions, persuasion and advocacy have the potential to create wrongdoing, and such wrongdoings should be guarded against; but forbidding the tactics outright, though easy to enforce, is a hasty and ultimately incorrect approach, as it also prohibits the good that could arise from employing such strategies.

Though excellence theorists are leery of explicitly sanctioning persuasion as a legitimate tactic, they frequently hint at doing so. Take the following from Dozier and Ehling (1992) for example:

> An objective, in order to be used in measuring program impact, must specify (a) the target public to be affected, (b) the nature of the intended change, (c) the specific knowledge, attitude, or behavior to be achieved, (d) the amount of change desired, and (e) a target date for achieving the objective. (p. 163)

Here, Dozier and Ehling (1992) speak about affecting change in the attitudes and behaviors of specific publics. Persuasion, by any other name, is still persuasion.

Additionally, Dozier and Ehling (1992) expound upon public relations' contribution to media content and its channeled ability to affect change in the attitudes and behaviors of specific publics. Persuasion, by any other name, is still persuasion.

Seib (2006) also speaks to the effects of soft power, typically a dialogic – that is symmetrical – approach used to gain higher mental ground and affect change in the attitudes and behaviors of specific publics. Persuasion, by any other name, is still persuasion.

Apparently, excellence theorists have little problem with these tactics provided the negative connotations of persuasion are removed. Ironically, it is this type of deception that excellence theorists have consistently tried to avoid in PR practice.

Finally, in closing this discussion of persuasion, it is worth noting that J. E. Grunig (1992c) – though not explicitly – appears to describe a model of public relations in which persuasion can be a useful tactic when combining principles of two-way asymmetric and two-way symmetric public relations:

> Steiner's model of public affairs consists of scanning the environment, coordinating the analysis of environmental forces, identifying the forces most likely to influence the company, selecting issues, including social and political projections in the strategic management process, developing communication programs for the publics of the enterprise, and developing programs to advance the interests of the company in federal, state, and local government. (p. 239)

Provided this model allows for a varied mix of tactics – a safe assumption considering that advancing interests of any group typically involves persuasion or advocacy of some kind – what is presented above is a useful and applicable definition of what public relations is and should be. It is situational, research based, focused on boundary spanning and environmental scanning, goal oriented, and ethically sound in that the interests of all affected parties are considered. In other words, it is a contingent approach to PR practice.

CHAPTER 8

THE ARGUMENT FOR CONTINGENCY THEORY

Defining Contingency Theory

The idea of contingency theory was introduced somewhat briefly by Cameron (1997), but was first elaborated upon by Cancel et al. (1997), who proposed contingency theory as a positive alternative to normative excellence theory. Contingency theory came about because of a belief that public relations was too dynamic a practice to fit the four-model excellence theory, especially considering that the best-practice orientation sanctions only one model for use. According to contingency theorists, an organization's stance toward various publics should be more fluid and situational (Cameron et al., 2008).

Of the numerous understandings and definitions of contingency theory, Cameron, Pang, and Jin's (2008) is perhaps the most concise and complete:

> The contingency theory offers a perspective to examine how one party relates to another through the enactment of a given stance toward the other party at a given point in time; how those stances change, sometimes almost instantaneously; and what influences the change in stance. (p. 136)

Numerous contingent variables affect the stance of organizations and publics toward one another, all of which can change as the relationship evolves over short- and long-term time periods. Cancel et al. (1997) originally identified 87 such variables which Cancel, Mitrook, and Cameron (1999) reduced by one, arriving at 86 distinct variables.

Cancel et al. (1999) also separated contingent variables into two general but distinct types: predisposing variables and situational variables. According to Cancel et al. (1999), "predisposing variables refer to those variables which have their greatest influence on an organization by helping to shape the organization's predisposition towards relations with external publics" (p. 177). Predisposing variables form an organization's stance toward a given public before the interaction in question takes place. Most generally, predisposing variables include, but are not limited to: corporation size, corporate culture, business exposure, public relations' access to the dominant coalition and line managers, dominant coalition support of community relations, individual characteristics, and public expectations for the organization to engage in socially responsible activities.

Situational variables, according to Cancel et al. (1999), "are the specific and often changing dynamics at work during particular situations involving an organization and an external public" (p. 177). Situational variables may or may not significantly change an organization's initial stance, which is based on predisposing variables. Most generally, situational variables include, but are not limited to: the urgency of the situation, the potential size of the threat in question, a cost-benefit analysis of various strategies, publics' perceptions of the issues, corporate reputation, the characteristics of external publics and their claims and actions, the feasibility of accommodating publics, and the power of a given public to meaningfully affect the organization.

As with any public relations theory, the basic tenets upon which the above described contingency theory are based depend enormously on theorists' conceptions of what public relations is and what practitioners do or should do. Cameron (1997) describes the goal of public relations quite simply: "In public relations we influence behavior" (p. 34). Contingency theorists

do not argue that tactics excellence theory traditionally approve – such as accommodation and collaboration – are without use; merely that their use, like the use of any tactic, is situationally limited. Moreover, like excellence theorists, contingency theorists also stress the important function public relations plays in relationship building (Cancel et al., 1997)

Public relations is, however, inextricably linked with advocacy, both in its practice and as it is generally understood by practitioners and outside observers. In speaking of their interview-based study, Cancel et al. (1999) point out that "each interviewee stated they are always, in one form or another, an advocate for their corporation; however, many participants also noted that their role at times involves some accommodation of external publics" (p. 176).

Public relations is as much – if not more so – centered on advocacy as it is accommodation, though the dialogic approach of two-way symmetry and excellence theory in general might lead one to believe the opposite. Cameron (1997) argues that public relations theorists cannot continue to overstate the value of dialogue at the expense of advocacy, or as he says more specifically, "We must not idealize ourselves out of existence" (p. 34).

The Flaws of Dialogue

Given the legitimacy of Cameron's (1997) above stated fear, he believes that it is time to rethink "the appropriate and effective accommodation of publics" (p. 29). Cameron (1997) argues that two-way symmetry, and excellence theory by extension, is always accommodative, at least in part. Public relations needs a more dynamic model in which the level of accommodation an organization displays toward its publics can be more freely determined. Cameron (1997) conceptualizes public relations as existing on a continuum between pure advocacy and pure accommodation, and the proper action to take is always in a state of flux because continually changing situational factors determine appropriate action. In general, neither advocacy,

accommodation, nor the infinite number of stances that exist in between are strictly off limits; the proper course of action is relatively determined based upon changing scenarios.

With this understanding in mind, Cameron (1997) argues that there is no reason to believe that purely aggressive approaches – commonly understood as asymmetric – will never work. Again, depending on the situation, the three asymmetric models may represent a reasonable and responsible course of action. Moreover, each of these models can internally vary in the degree to which they are either accommodative or advocacy-based (Cancel et al., 1997).

Such an open practice of public relations that abandons the best-practice view can only arise if practitioners and scholars accept that "beliefs stand on higher moral ground than the principle of dialogue" (Cameron, 1997, p. 32). In other words, contingency theorists are pragmatically goal oriented, and the belief that public relations can and should affect meaningful change trumps the excellence idea that dialogic communication is the only effective and ethical way to create such change.

Such skepticism to excellent PR practice seems healthy considering the numerous occasions in which dialogue either fails as a tactic to elicit needed change or creates ethically undesirable outcomes. There are numerous instances in which creating dialogue is not possible. Dialogue between an organization and its publics is sometimes forbidden by legal or regulatory forces (Cancel et al., 1997). When dialogue is not expressly prohibited, organizations and publics may still be unable to engage in it if they hold completely incongruent ideologies – that is to say, they are diametrically opposed (Cameron, 1997; Cancel et al., 1997; Cancel et al., 1999). Moreover, oftentimes publics refuse to cede any ground through dialogic negotiations because they have created a deeply ingrained version of reality in which they are unequivocally right and

the organization is unquestionably wrong; in these instances collaboration and compromise are virtually impossible strategies (Cameron, 1997; Leichty, 1997).

There are also instances in which dialogic and accommodative tactics can be used but should not be because of the negative consequences they create. As Cancel et al. (1997) argue, accommodating morally repugnant publics is ethically wrong, and to do so "would place communication *process* above ethical *principle*" (Cancel et al., 1999, p. 173). While it is true that accommodation and dialogue – though often interrelated – are different tactics, even agreeing to engage in dialogue with such publics is wrong because it could legitimize their unethical stances (Cameron et al., 2008). Turning once again to Conrad (1985), avoidance is sometimes the best strategy.

Finally, organizations have potentially infinite publics and operate with finite resources. Creating a useful dialogue, though sometimes beneficial, is always a labor – and sometimes cost – intensive process. Organizations simply cannot engage in dialogue or accommodation with every public because doing so would set a precedent to which the organization could never fully live up (Cameron, 1997). In a perfect world, dialogue would always be the answer, but reality is far from perfect, publics and organizations are sometimes stubborn, and resources are always finite, which means dialogue is not always a feasible or appropriate response.

A Better Approach

Indeed, it seems there remains little basis on which to promote the best-practice excellence model. As Leichty and Springston (1993) say, "We fail to see clear theoretical reasons for expecting that an organization should consistently employ the same PR model across publics or across time with the same public" (p. 332). Still on the best-practice topic, Leichty and

Springston (1993) also argue that excellence theorists' abandoning of J. E. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) contingency approach to the four PR models was a theoretical mistake:

> We fear the 'two-way symmetrical model is best' position is a step backward. Attempts at a normative theory may be appropriate but the 'one best model' position is an unfortunate one. 'Single Best' theories of leadership and conflict management have been superseded by situational and developmental models. (p. 334)

In the case of public relations, contingency theory seems poised to supersede the best-practice excellence theory, just as Leichty and Springston (1993) predicted.

The failings of this best-practice approach seem evident to many excellence theorists as well. L. A. Grunig and Toth (2006) argue that "different relationship models need to be developed with specific publics or individuals" (p. 45), which sounds remarkably like a contingent approach and a tacit admission that the single-best, two-way symmetrical approach is not always best. The same could be said about this early statement from J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992): "Organizations change models of public relations as situations and issues change or […] they use different models for different programs" (p. 297).

L. A. Grunig and Toth (2006) also address the possibility that dialogue may fail to create win-win situations when numerous publics have incongruent demands on organizations: "Since organizations typically experience pressure from numerous constituencies – often with contradictory demands – promoting *every* public's interest is difficult to impossible" (p. 45). Perhaps the inability to adequately represent competing interests explains why The International Public Relations Association Code of Conduct, adopted in 1961, forbade such practices, mandating that "a member shall not represent conflicting or competing interests without the express consent of those concerned" (Wright, 2006, p. 185).

The problem for excellence theory is that it has no answer for what actions one should take if dialogic communication fails among opposed publics. Contingency theory sanctions the use of other – often asymmetric – tactics when two-way dialogue falters, providing viable alternatives to practitioners.

Contingency theory also addresses many other non-refuting anomalies excellence theory presents. First, because contingency theory is so reliant on current situations to shape and inform PR practice, there is little question that it is a positive and therefore applicable theory, while serious doubts about the positive nature of excellence theory are abundant.

Contingency theory also accounts for cultural differences more completely than does excellence theory. Sriramesh and White (1992) argue that public relations is becoming increasingly globalized and must therefore account for such cultural differences. However, Sriramesh and White (1992) imply that excellence theory does not work across cultures, as they advocate for a "culture-specific approach and contend that organizations are affected by culture" (p. 609). Culture thus becomes both a predisposing and a situational variable for which excellence theory does not adequately account. Contingency theory, on the other hand, has shown promise as a theory that works both across cultures and various communication fields, most notably conflict resolution, crisis communication, and media relations. The theory has also shown usefulness in several East Asian countries as well as for multinational business (Cameron et al., 2008; Pang, Cropp, and Cameron, 2006; Shin, Park, and Cameron, 2006; Wilcox and Cameron, 2006).

Contingency theory also provides a framework through which practitioners can better understand the complex factors that influence publics' decision making. Using the field of risk communication as an example, Palenchar and Heath (2006) argue the following:

> The public evaluates an activity or technology as more risky if it is involuntary, unfamiliar, unknown, uncontrollable, controlled by others, unfair, memorable, dreaded, acute, focused in time and space, fatal, delayed, artificial, and undetectable, as well as if individual mitigation is impossible. (p. 149)

Without some existing paradigm through which one can categorize such variables and reach communication decisions based upon how these variables affect a given public, there is no logically sound way to proceed. Excellence theory provides no such typology for contingent variables, which may in part explain its consistent dedication to the two-way symmetrical approach: without an understanding of such variables and how they affect publics' decisions, a best-practice model would be as good as any. Unfortunately for excellence theory, these variables are important and the competing contingency theory provides a way to better understand not only the variables themselves but also the communication strategy one should employ when considering those variables fully.

Problems of Contingency Theory

Though contingency theory offers a better framework for understanding the positive value of public relations as well as providing applicable strategies, tactics, and guidelines to practitioners, it is not without its flaws. Take the following from Szlemko and Christen (2007):

> Beyond the 86 contingent factors identified by Cameron and associates, however, there are literally hundreds and maybe thousands of situational variables to consider, calling into question the practicality of the contingency theory as a model for public relations practice. (p. 2)

At first glance, Szlemko and Christen (2007) appear to criticize contingency theory for being too broad. This concern is most certainly a valid one. As a theory expands to explain a

greater range of phenomena, as contingency theory has, it runs to the risk of trying to explain so much that it loses its theoretical powers of prediction and prescription.

On the other hand, Szlemko and Christen's (2007) statement could be taken as an argument that theory is still too narrow. Indeed, there are numerous and potentially infinite variables that contingently affect communication. Further and more detailed explanation of existing and potential variables is needed.

Whether too broad or too narrow, contingency theory provides a prime example of one the major theoretical problems of a deductively developed theory, namely that "it is almost impossible to define all the variables that might be measured for any phenomenon" (Reynolds, 1971, p. 149). Finding the "Goldilocks point" for contingency theory – the point at which it explains enough variables to be thorough, but not so many that is loses its predictive value – has been, is, and will continue to be a serious struggle for contingency theorists.

CHAPTER 9

CONTINGENCY TRUMPS EXCELLENCE:

EXAMPLES OF ACTIVIST GROUPS AND THE POWER VARIABLE

Though contingency theory has its problems, they are less severe from both pragmatic and theoretical standpoints than those from which excellence theory suffers. This being the case, contingency theory trumps excellence theory on its ability to deal with dilemmas that exist within concrete scenarios faced by practitioners, as well as conceptual problems faced by theoreticians. To provide a greater understanding of just how contingency theory displays some superiority over excellence theory, the pragmatic problem of activist pressure as well as the theoretical concern over the power variable will be explored as viable examples.

Activists Groups

As defined by L. A. Grunig (1992a), "an activist public is a group of two or more individuals who organize in order to influence another public or publics through action that may include education, compromise, persuasion, pressure tactics, or force" (p. 504). Already, from this basic definition, excellent practitioners would find themselves at a disadvantage, as asymmetric communication tactics forbidden to practitioners are used – and even approved of when used – by activist publics.

To combat such a one-sided communicative advantage, excellence theorists such as Hon (2006) assert that "activist publics should communicate with the organizations they target in the same manner that these activists would prefer to be treated" (p. 54). This deontological approach would work in an ideal world, but this golden rule of managing activist publics only keeps a level playing field for excellent practitioners should activist publics choose to abide by it.

Problems for excellent practitioners occur when activists do not adhere to such guidelines, which appears to be a frequent occurrence. As L. A. Grunig (1992a) states, "When it does come to a fight, the weapons in each activist's arsenal might vary. And as the battle drags on, the weapons might become more lethal" (p. 516). A lethal communication weapon – presumably conceptualized as a drastic asymmetric tactic – would most certainly constitute a tool which activist publics would rather not have used against them, but one they would employ nonetheless.

Engaging in two-way symmetrical communication with such groups must be exceedingly difficult, if not impossible. Again, quoting L. A. Grunig (1992a) on excellent management of activist publics: "Instead of trying to dominate their environment, practitioners of this model [two-way symmetric] want to understand and cooperate with their relevant external publics" (p. 510). Though a noble and desirable goal, creating such understanding is not always doable, just as cooperating with an uncooperative activist group is, by definition, impossible.

Should collaboration or compromise fail, excellence theorists urge for the creation of a "no deal" situation. As Hon (2006) defines it, "no deal means that both parties agree to disagree. No deal is a symmetrical strategy because it preserves the relationship while leaving open the opportunity to find a win-win solution at a later date" (p. 67). Apart from the fact that a win-win situation is inherently a lose-lose situation as well, and thus not always desirable – an issue discussed earlier – the no deal relationship is in and of itself undesirable.

In a no deal scenario, there is no guarantee that a win-win compromise will be reached in the future, and should that potential not be realized, this strategy would not be truly symmetrical or excellent. Perhaps more important is what develops in such a relationship while the involved parties attempt to negotiate an excellent solution. Though the relationship may indeed be

preserved, such a disagreeable relationship is inherently politicized and unstable. Though in-fighting within a system can ultimately be a good thing, as the potential to develop a workable and acceptable solution still remains, sustained hostility and instability can ultimately lead to the destruction of the system if left unresolved. The longer a problem persists in a no deal relationship, the more likely the termination of that relationship becomes (Mintzberg, 1983)

It seems that excellence theory provides little helpful information about effectively managing such hostile groups. If anything, excellence theorists have emboldened activists to employ "lethal weapons" of communication. In describing how activists should act, J. E. Grunig (2001) claims that "if the organization does not respond to the symmetrical initiative, then [activists should] use asymmetrical techniques to force the organization to consider the public's problem also to be its problem" (p. 19). J. E. Grunig's (2001) suggestion for activists to behave in this way completely contradicts Hon's (2006) golden rule mandate. Moreover, urging activist publics to behave in such a manner – namely forcing organizational accommodation using aggressive advocacy – would leave organizations' only with asymmetric tactics to fight back. For excellent organizations, however – which by definition adopt a two-way symmetrical stance even when a public possesses such a great deal of power – accommodation would be their only recourse.

From a contingent standpoint, on the other hand, at no time would a public or an organization be forced into a single communicative approach. Rather, the circumstance would dictate the best approach. Therefore, the appropriate organizational response to such hostility on the part of activist publics might be to accommodate their needs, or it might be to adopt a more asymmetric, advocacy-based approach and fight them head on. Indeed, as Hon (2006) argues, organizations as well as activists are advocates for their various standpoints, at least to some

degree. Contingency theory, unlike excellence theory, does not place an unneeded and arbitrary limit on the degree of advocacy an organization can effectively or ethically employ.

For example, just as activists use the media in one-way asymmetric manners to garner support and establish legitimacy for their causes, organizations can do the same – provided the information they supply is truthful and non-deceptive. Moreover, the full range of Conrad's (1985) conflict resolution strategies are at the disposal of a contingent practitioner. L. A. Grunig (1992a) argues that "organizations that [consider] their opposition to be little or no threat rarely [respond] at all" (p. 519), a practice which she views as universally negative. However, ignoring a group – which is essentially using Conrad's (1985) avoidance technique – can be a useful strategy as it can cast doubts upon activist groups' credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the general public. Again, depending on the situation, dismissing or ignoring publics with unethical or dubious agendas is a more ethical decision for organizations to make than the decision to engage in two-way symmetric dialogue, a point which contingency theory fully embraces.

Because contingency theory allows for an equal – or at least near equal – number of communication tools to remain in the arsenals of both activist publics and organizations, it provides a better model for the two to interact and to create a stable, though perhaps not always warm, relationship.

The Power Variable

According to Mintzberg (1983), "A good part of the literature, as noted, is more concerned with abstractions of what power is than with the realities of how it gets used" (p. 2). This criticism fits excellence theory well, as the lack of a *workable* conception of power is a serious problem for excellence theory.

Excellence in Public Relations and Communication Management, as well as excellence theorists in general, mention power most often vaguely and in passing. Nonetheless, a fairly consistent understanding of the workings of power emerges from these works, an idea that is best understood as empowerment.

J. E. Grunig (1992b) describes empowerment in the following manner: "The symmetrical concept of power […] can be described as *empowerment* – of collaborating to increase the power of everyone in the organization, to the benefit of everyone in the organization" (p. 564). J. E. Grunig (2006) maintains this power conception in a later work: "In the Excellence study, we conceptualized power as empowerment, the expansion of power throughout the organization and to its external stakeholders" (p. 164).

The problems of a collaborative empowerment conception of power are similar to the issues of compromise and collaboration as discussed earlier, particularly as they relate to zero-sum games in closed systems. Empowerment – as well as collaboration – implies that parties can truly "get more of what they want when they give up some of what they want" (J. E. Grunig and White, 1992, p. 39). Undoubtedly, such a conception is sometimes true as open-system games of pure cooperation do exist; however, they are rare, and therein lies the problem.

Again, in frequent closed-system zero-sum games, empowering others, by its very definition, cannot enable one to increase his or her own power base. Power, like everything else in closed systems, is finite, and to surrender it to another party inevitably decreases one's own power.

Also, there is evidence to support that empowerment is not a feasible way to *create* power – though it may be a feasible means of transference. According to Conrad (1985), "power begets power" (p. 189), meaning that those who hold relative power over others commonly use

that leverage to increase their own power bases. Power rarely emerges out of spontaneity or results from an empowering gift.

The self-perpetuating power differentials Conrad (1985) describes would logically seem very common, and even L. A. Grunig (1992c) asserts that "an imbalance in the relationship between those with power and those without power" (p. 485) is a frequently referenced factor when conceptualizing power. Despite this fact, power differentials are seemingly ignored by excellence theorists in favor of an implausible empowerment conception.

In following Mintzberg's (1983) general critique, it would seem that excellence theorists do have some abstract idea of power, but in the words of Berger (2005), excellence theory "neglects power considerations that influence practice" (p. 22). That is to say, empowerment fails to explain power in practice.

PR theory must account for power and consider it in the context of practice, all the while acknowledging the power that organizations have over PR departments and how public relations is practiced (Berger, 2005). While excellence theory adequately explains the dominant coalition's ability to shape public relations through a power-control model, the theory largely ignores power as it applies to general practice. This failure to explain power is particularly problematic considering contingency theory's attention to the importance of power and the ways in which it is manifested and exercised (Cancel et al., 1997; Cancel et al. 1999). Power, like several other issues, is yet another non-refuting anomaly for excellence theory.

Common Conceptions of Power

Broad theories of public relations – including both excellence and contingency theories – typically do not develop their own unique understandings of power relationships. The study of power and the study of public relations are individually daunting tasks, but to combine them in a

truly complete sense would be monumental indeed. Instead, most broad PR theories understand power as it has been conceived in grander terms.

What follows is a truncated description of several such theories of power, each meant to serve an illustrative purpose; namely, the implausibility of excellence theory to explain power in a thorough or applicable way. Specifically, power differentials between organizations and publics are critical in most viable conceptions of power, and excellence theory fails to account for this (Berger, 2005). Moreover, the manner in which power is manifested and exercised is often based upon numerous contingent factors that a best-practice model such as excellence theory either ignores or conceptualizes only vaguely (Mintzberg, 1983). Finally, it would be difficult to apply any of the following approaches to excellence theory because it views power overly idealistically, preferring to see power as a freely exchanged empowering resource rather than a means to obtain other valued resources using leverage.

Power and Exchange. Though power and exchange are frequently linked in the literature, there is a clear hesitation on the part of excellence theorists to conceive of the power of public relations in terms of exchange. In an attempt to differentiate and distance public relations from marketing[12], Ehling, White, and J. E. Grunig (1992) criticize Kotler (1976) for defining exchange "not in economic terms but in social-psychological terms in which at least two parties have something of value for each other" (p. 380).

Kotler (1976) defines marketing as "the study of exchange processes and relationships" and a "human activity directed at satisfying needs and wants through exchange processes" (pp. 4,

[12] The complex nature of the relationship between marketing and public relations is an interesting topic in and of itself. Kotler (1976) provides some understanding from the marketing perspective and Ehling, White, and J. E. Grunig (1992) approach the issue from the public relations side. For a more thorough and balanced exploration of the subject, see Hutton's (2001) Defining the Relationship Between Public Relations and Marketing: Public Relation's Most Important Challenge, in Heath and Vasquez's (Eds.) *Handbook of Public Relations* (pp. 205-214).

5). While marketing and public relations are undoubtedly different fields, they share a great deal in common, and the use of communication to mediate relationships – often through exchange processes – is one area of similarity (Hutton, 2001). In fact, aspects of cost-benefit analyses within ongoing relationships – a central tenet of Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) social exchange theory (SET), to which Kotler (1976) refers – frequently manifest themselves in the writings of various excellence theorists (Dozier and L. A. Grunig, 1992; Ehling, 1992; Ehling, White, and J. E. Grunig, 1992; L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Ehling, 1992). It seems odd, then, that excellence theorists would depart from the exchange basis of communication power that Kotler (1976) outlines.[13]

Despite opposition from excellence theory, exchange presents a useful way to conceptualize power, especially for communication theorists – and Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) SET provides a needed typology. In SET, like in most theories of power, power is understood as the capacity or ability to exert influence over one or more individuals to create desired outcomes (Katz and Kahn, 1966; Mintzberg, 1983).

The general assumption of SET is that people and groups rely on one another for resources, so exchange is a necessary social function, both on an interpersonal and organizational level. (Molm, 1997; Emerson, 1972a). Because exchange is a needed function, and because exchange takes place in the form of resources, resource control thus becomes an important path to power. According to Conrad (1985), resources are proportionally related to power increases as they become scarcer, more significant, and increasingly irreplaceable.

According to Guerrero, Anderson, and Afifi (2001), each party in an exchange relationship attempts to outweigh the costs of exchange with gained rewards, a process that is

[13] Even more interesting than the exchange-based similarities of marketing and public relations is the mirroring of Kotler's (1976) marketing-management philosophies by J. E. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations. For greater detail, see Kotler's (1976) *Marketing Management: Analysis, planning, and control*, pp. 12-20.

made easier with increased resource control. No matter how the power differential is constructed via resource control, exchange relationships are only maintained under conditions of perceived equability, which leads to satisfaction – satisfaction in turn being measured through a complex comparison process.

According to Thibaut and Kelley (1959), this process is partially defined by the comparison level for alternatives (CL_{alt}): a person or organization measures an obtained resource by comparing it to the CL_{alt}, or the "outcomes that the person [or organization] can achieve in his [or its] best available alternative to the present relationship" (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959, p. 100). It logically follows that, if the CL_{alt} appears more rewarding or beneficial than the current exchange relationship, the individual or organization will abandon the current relationship in favor of the CL_{alt} (Heath, 1976).

Beyond the CL_{alt}, there also exists the comparison level (CL), which is "a psychologically meaningful mid-point [sic] for the scale of outcomes – a neutral point on a scale of satisfaction-dissatisfaction" (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959, p. 81). The CL, then, is the mental representation an individual or organization has of what constitutes a satisfying relationship; in short, the CL is an expectation.

Most importantly, the CL and CL_{alt} explain not only the benefits parties expect in creating exchange relationships, but how those relationships exist amorphously and are constantly reshaped by shifting analyses of value. Moreover, the CL and CL_{alt} explain why dissatisfying and unfulfilling relationships continue to exist: "[…] a man may be dissatisfied with a relationship (since the outcomes fall *below* his CL) but yet forced to remain in it (since the outcomes are *above* his CL_{alt})" (Heath, 1976, p. 45).

Although such dissatisfying relationships are not necessarily desirable, they are sustainable, despite what excellence theory's privileging of empowerment might otherwise imply. According to Heath (1976), "the level of a man's CL_{alt} determines his dependence upon a relationship and hence his power within it" (p. 24), an idea that has been purported by other social exchange theorists (Emerson, 1972b; Molm, 1997; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). In simpler terms, if one has a high number of desirable alternatives to a current exchange relationship, one possesses the ability to exit that relationship more freely or to pressure the other actor(s) for greater rewards. Conversely, an individual with few or no desirable alternatives has little choice but to submit to the will of the other actor(s) to maintain the relationship and exchange of resources.

Structurally speaking, whether an exchange relationship is unilateral or bilateral also has great power implications. In unilateral exchanges, one party controls the resources and thus the exchange, and therefore has the power to dictate the nature of that exchange (Emerson, 1972b; Molm, 1997). According to Molm (1997), the party in control of the resources has the power to withhold those resources and eliminate or temporarily stall an exchange; this process is often done to elicit behavioral change from the other party that will increase the rewards for the party distributing the resource. Furthermore, Daniels & Spiker (1983) explain that during an exchange of resources, particularly a unilateral exchange, a loss of resources also constitutes a loss of power to the resource holder, as the other actor(s) inevitably becomes less dependent on the original resource controller for that resource in the future. For this reason, those individuals or groups who control resource exchange in unilateral exchange relationships may be inconsistent in setting the rate of exchange to maintain power. This ability to withhold resources enables the

powerful party in an exchange relationship to inflict greater costs on its weaker counterpart (Molm, 1997).

Typically, in exchange relationships constituted by power inequities, the weaker party has little choice but to comply, but nevertheless retains the ability to exit the relationship. Heath (1976), drawing from Peter Blau's exchange research, describes the necessary components that force compliance by one party to the power of another in an exchange relationship:

> He [Blau] presents four conditions which, taken together, give men no options but to submit to the power of another and comply with his requests. These conditions are: (1) They have no services to offer which the other would like in return. (2) They cannot obtain the needed service elsewhere. (3) They cannot coerce him to furnish the service. (4) They cannot resign themselves to do without the service. (p. 25)

Provided no one party meets all of these criteria, neither is captive to an unsatisfying exchange relationship. At this point, according to Guerrero et al. (2001), either party can employ one of four strategies: exit (ending the relationship), neglect (allowing the relationship to deteriorate and likely dissolve), voice (attempting to better the relationship), or loyalty (waiting for the relationship to improve on its own).

Because SET is primarily concerned with managing relationships of exchange and excellence theorists do not conceive of public relations as exchange based, employing such an approach would be difficult, if not impossible (Ehling, White, and J. E. Grunig, 1992). Moreover, because a major component of SET is providing models for correcting or adjusting to power inequities and because excellence theory provides no framework to applicably conceptualize power inequities (beyond the idealistic approach of empowerment), employing SET in an excellent setting is all-the-more unlikely.

Organizational Theories. Though applicable in organizational settings, Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) SET was originally conceived to explain interpersonal exchange relationships. Several scholars have since built on their work, often simply putting it in organizational terms. Mintzberg's (1983) equilibrium theory is one such extension.

According to Mintzberg (1983), an organization is viewed as a system by its various participants, each participant seeking to balance inducements from the organization with his or her contributions to it. In general, organizational participants, though classified in five distinct groups – employees, investors, suppliers, distributors, and consumers – all share this common goal. In the quest for this exchange equilibrium, participants will freely accept the control of the exchange process by a central authority, namely the organization; however, they only accept this relationship if, in return, they perceive they hold relative power over other participants as a function of the resources they control.

Essentially, Mintzberg's (1983) equilibrium theory is a condensed organizational view of SET, but many of his ideas about power and the means by which it is exercised in and around organizations are not only exceedingly complex, but also contingent upon numerous organizational factors. For Mintzberg (1983), emerging power configurations in organizational settings depend on the type of external influencers an organization faces, the manner in which those influencers communicate, and the response of the organization's internal coalition to the configuration of the external coalition.[14]

Mintzberg (1983) conceives of four general types of external influencers. First, there are owners, who hold the legal title to an organization and possess formal power through those legal channels.

[14] Mintzberg's (1983) writings about organizational power and how it is manifested are extremely detailed. What is provided here is a very brief summary of his ideas. For a more thorough understanding, please see Mintzberg's (1983) *Power In and Around Organizations*, particularly parts one and four.

Second, there are associates, which include the subgroups of suppliers, clients, partners, and competitors. Associates typically posses power by controlling needed resources or knowledge.

Next, there are employee associations, the most common of which being unions and professional organizations. Employees typically have fewer skills than owners or associates, but they possess great power in numbers as the whole of an employee association controls needed technical skills.

Finally, there are publics, an umbrella term Mintzberg (1983) uses to refer to those affected by an organization who do not work for it, supply it, own it, or buy from it. Publics can manifest themselves in various ways – special interest groups, government, advocates of public interest, etc. – but they typically gain power over organizations in one of three ways: knowing someone in power, interfering with needed organizational resources, or damaging organizational images and reputations. Even the mere threat that a public may act in such a manner provides a clear path to power.

Mintzberg (1983) conceptualized a complex typology not only to understand who holds power, but how it is commonly exercised though various communication tactics. He categorized these communication tactics using a series of descriptive continua each with two apexes: regular or episodic, general or focused, detached or personal, formal or informal, and initiative (trying to persuade the organization to adopt new behavior) or obstructive (trying to persuade the organization to cease a current behavior).

Based upon this typology, Mintzberg (1983) describes five basic ways in which organizational participants exercise power, with approaches that are episodic, focused, and personal being the most direct and forceful.

First, power is manifested through social norms, which are consistently evolving and culturally unique ethical guidelines by which organizations are bound to operate. All organizational participants, at some level or another, contribute to social norms. This tactic is regular, general, informal, typically obstructive, and may be either detached or personal depending on the situation.

Second, there are formal constraints, which are specific and legally imposed guidelines, the most common of which are official sanctions and government regulations. This tactic is focused, formal, detached, and typically regular and obstructive.

Third are pressure campaigns, which develop as publics move from latent to active status. Generally these occur when specific activist groups act to impose their will in lieu of social norms or formal constraints. Pressure campaigns can take numerous forms, but most often they are informal, episodic, focused, and can be either personal or detached as well as either initiative or obstructive, again depending on the situation.

Fourth is what Mintzberg (1983) calls direct controls. Direct controls can manifest themselves in numerous ways as can pressure campaigns. Typically, direct control occurs when a group or individual gains access to decision makers or gains the ability to make organizational decisions directly. Usually this tactic is focused, personal, episodic, and may be formal or informal as well as initiative or obstructive.

Finally, and rather straightforward, is membership on the board of directors. The board of directors generally exercises power in its ability to appoint and remove CEOs, to take direct control of an organization during a crisis, and to review managerial decisions. Typically, this tactic is personal, focused, formal, episodic, and usually obstructive.

According to Mintzberg (1983), the type of external influencers and the manner in which their messages are communicated determine the nature of the external coalition at large. Typically, the external coalition manifests itself in one of three ways: the dominated external coalition, the passive external coalition, or the divided external coalition. In turn, the nature of the external coalition shapes the response and subsequent make-up of an organization's internal coalition.

First, there is the dominated external coalition, in which an external influencer or a small number of influencers acting together controls most of the power within the external coalition. Such consolidated power enables the external coalition to exert considerable influence and even control over the organization's internal coalition. The dominated external coalition often leads to a power conception of the organization Mintzberg (1983) calls the *instrument*, in which the organization's main function is to serve a dominant external influencer.

Second, there is the passive external coalition. In this scenario, external power is diffused among numerous influencers, each with limited power. Because no one group or agenda emerges as dominating, the power of the external coalition shifts to the internal, potentially creating numerous organizational power configurations. Passive external coalitions tend to correlate with the *closed system*, in which the CEO and upper management control the organization; the *autocracy*, in which the CEO emerges as the only power holder; the *missionary*, in which the mission of the organization becomes the dominating force; or the *meritocracy*, in which the CEO and various field experts dominate the internal coalition.

Finally, there is the divided external coalition, in which power is less concentrated than in the dominated external coalition, but less diffuse than in the passive external coalition. Typically, a small number of opposing external influencers hold all the power, but none emerges as

dominant. As members of the internal organization try to appease these opposing groups, the internal coalition becomes divided and shifts into a *political arena,* a free-for-all scenario in which internal influencers often pursue personal goals. While the political arena is sometimes critical in transitioning from one organizational configuration to another, it is ultimately unsustainable because no group can achieve its goals. Eventually, the internal coalition must resolve its differences or the organization will likely fail.

The above summary of Mintzberg's (1983) organizational theories, while still complex, is a simplified version of his ideas as they appear in their entirety. It is as though Mintzberg (1983) has developed a complicated flowchart for understanding power configurations based on contingent actions of the external and internal coalitions, while still arguing that each organizational power configuration is potentially fluid. In other words, this string of contingency could continue infinitely as organization continually change and adapt.

It is unlikely that a best-practice model such as excellence theory could ever conceive of power in such a complex and contingent manner, and if it could it could only do so abstractly. The rules of two-way communication do not govern the way power is consolidated or exercised in Mintzberg's (1983) model, and therefore, it is difficult to integrate it in a meaningful way with excellence theory.

Berger's (2005) Power Conceptions in PR Practice. Viewing excellence theory's empowerment conception of power as incomplete, Berger (2005) developed his own understanding of power relations as they apply specifically in a PR setting. He conceived of power as being exercised in one of three ways.

The first Berger (2005) dubbed "power over relations," which he equated to the practice of two-way asymmetrical public relations. Parties engaged in this type of power struggle are

focused on self-interest and control and power becomes a necessary means by which one group can dominate another; either the organization or the public emerges as dominant. Though not always, power over relations can be hegemonic.

Berger (2005) calls the second form "power with relations" and pairs it with two-way symmetrical practice. Parties that exercise this conception are less engaged in struggle than focused on dialogue and shared power. Essentially, this understanding of power is synonymous with the excellent empowerment model.

Considering that the power over relations model could – though not always – lead to unethical hegemonic control and that the empowerment alternative appeared infrequently in practice, Berger (2005) conceived of a third alternative, "power to relations." This conception of power is a type of internal activism in which PR practitioners can counter the dominance model of power over relations should it become unethically hegemonic.

Practitioners of the power to relations model may engage in sanctioned or unsanctioned communication tactics to counter a dominating force. Sanctioned tactics include the use of professional advocacy, demonstrating the value of PR practice and practitioner opinion through performance, building alliances, constructing rational arguments against hegemonic control, and enhancing political skills in and around the organization. Unsanctioned tactics include leaking information, counterculture action, creating alternative interpretations of events to halt organizational power, whistleblowing, and association-level activism.

Essentially, the power to relations model provides an applicable stop-gap for organizations practicing the power over relations model hegemonically, which is a major goal of excellence theorists; unfortunately, the power with relations model is often unable to achieve that goal. More importantly, it is virtually impossible to maintain any power configuration

indefinitely, a major blow to the best-practice excellence model and a point on which many power theorists agree (Thibaut and Kelly, 1959; Mintzberg, 1983; Berger, 2005).

For example, in speaking of his power conception in particular, Berger (2005) suggests that "there is an ongoing dialectic between these two relations of power [power over and power with], which are not stable, permanently fixed, or necessarily associated with particular individuals or functions" (p. 16). This contingent approach to the manifestation and exercise of power runs counter to the fixed empowerment approach of excellence theory, and once again it seems that a potentially fruitful understanding of power is incompatible with excellence theory.

Observations about Excellence and Power. In understanding various configurations and conceptions of power, perhaps the contingent aspects of it are most important. Power is generated in different ways, exercised in different ways, controlled by different people, and maintained in a fragile balance that is in a constant state of flux. Excellent public relations truly has no way to account for such a conception of power.

More specifically, the symmetrical model cannot account for the exercise of power in unbalanced differentials. The empowerment model is simply too narrowly focused to explain such complexity. Moreover, the moments of dialogue that excellence theory champions appear to be more episodic than regular, and even then those moments occur most often in bargaining processes in which one party is attempting to dominate the other rather than share power (Conrad, 1985; Murphy, 1991; Leichty, 1997). Finally, the notion of shared power depends upon all parties acting in a deontologically ethical manner; but self-interest frequently trumps shared interests in matters of power control, which in turn limits the excellent empowerment model even further.

CHAPTER 10

ISSUES OF ETHICALITY

Public Relations and Ethics

Up to this point, this critique of excellence theory has largely been based on the implausibility of the two-way symmetrical model remaining the most consistently efficacious manner of practice across all scenarios. Just as the excellence approach varies in efficacy across situations, it also varies in its level of ethicality, both across situations and conceptions of what constitutes an ethical action. The excellent proposition that two-way symmetrical public relations holds a monopoly on ethicality is simply untrue (Wright, 2006).

This does not mean, however, that excellence theory is wrong to account for ethics or to provide some standard by which practitioners can act ethically. PR practitioners, as well as the organizations they represent, should consider ethical action critical as such acts build needed trust between organizations and the publics they serve. Moreover, acting in a morally responsible manner limits government regulation and interference within a given industry, allowing the organizations that operate within that industry a greater degree of autonomy (Gower, 2006).

Like the preceding discussion of efficacy, evaluating the ethicality of a given practice cannot proceed without a preliminary understanding of exactly what constitutes ethical behavior, which in turn provides a standard for evaluation.

Hallahan (2006), in describing ethics in the context of public relations, provides a good working definition of ethics: "Ethics are *social constructs* that are negotiated. People concerned with particular social problems […] come to agree on what are accepted rules through a process

of deliberation" (p. 121). Because what is ethical varies across cultures, time, and sometimes situations, it is a safe assumption that determining what is and is not ethical is neither a simplistic nor a straightforward process (Nielsen, 1972).

With this complexity is mind, it is important to remember that "our normal, immediate, rather absolutistic, moral reactions need to be questioned" (Nielsen, 1972, p. 241). Too often the claim of excellence theorists that two-way symmetrical public relations is the most ethical form of practice is accepted without evaluation, or at best accepted prima facie. It is important to examine this assertion more fully and to establish whether excellence theory provides an applicable and needed ethical framework for PR practice. As Bowen (2004) argues, "public relations needs to proceed from an ethical vantage, using a set of decision-making guidelines that are well conceptualized, applicable across a variety of situations, and defensible" (p. 75). The question then becomes one of determining which ethical framework – and by extension, which conception of PR practice – meets these needs. As the reader will see, no ethical approach or PR model *always* does.

Aristotelian Ethics

Though he established his ethical principles before the common era, Aristotle (1897) remains a highly referenced ethicist. Aristotle (1897) understood that ethics concerns itself both with the intentions and actions of moral agents, and that "all reasoning on matters of conduct must be like a sketch in outline; it cannot be scientifically exact" (p. 415).

Part of what makes the field of ethics so imprecise is that it is an inherently political endeavor in which moral agents must consistently work to balance the needs of various groups – an exercise not unlike that of public relations itself. For Aristotle (1897), acting ethically to achieve this balance means striving to be virtuous.

Aristotle (1897) understood virtue as a mean – commonly referred to as the golden mean – that exists between two vices, with one extreme always being less moral than the other. For example, courage was considered by Aristotle (1897) to be a virtue that existed between the vices of cowardice and foolhardiness – the former presumably being less desirable.

According to Aristotle (1897), to act virtuously resulted from conceiving of a virtuous and ethical character and working to achieve that character by making acts of virtue consistent and habitual. While many ethicists do not equate morality with the practice of virtue in the same way that Aristotle (1897) did, his ideas of moderation and balance remain influential. Still, this ancient understanding of ethics has been largely overshadowed by the opposing 18th century ethical philosophies of utilitarianism and deontology.

Utilitarian Ethics

According to Pojman (2004), "utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory which aims at maximizing happiness or 'utility'" (p. 227). Utilitarianism is often used in conjunction with consequentialism because advocates of this ethical paradigm argue that actions are to be morally judged based on the consequences they beget (Nielsen, 1972). In its most basic form, utilitarianism promotes acting to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

Bentham (1789), one of the foundational thinkers behind utilitarianism, based his ethical theory on the principle that people often act out of self-interested quid pro quo, meaning they act in adherence to their own needs but not in complete disregard to others. Within this ideology, actions are judged as right based on their ability to promote pleasures – or goods – and diminish pains – or evils.

According to Bentham (1789), there are several ways in which to gauge exactly how good or evil an act is. One must account for the intensity of the pleasures or pains produced as

well as the durations of those consequences. Moreover, one must also account for a level of certainty before acting – that is, how likely a given act is to produce the consequences predicted. Additionally, there is the issue of propinquity, which measures how widely or remotely felt the effects of an action are. Also, the fecundity and purity of actions must also be considered, the idea being that an act that promotes goodness is "more good" should it likely beget similar results in the future and "less good" should it likely beget opposite results in the future; the reverse is true for evils. Finally, the ultimate morality of an action must also be judged based on extension, or the number of people affected. Goods are "more good" if they affect more people and "less good" if they affect fewer people; again, the reverse is true of evils.

Though Bentham (1789) established these evaluating guidelines over two centuries ago, utilitarian ethicists continue to adhere to them to some degree or another. Beyond Bentham's (1789) ideas, however, there are considerations concerning utilitarianism that merit mentioning. First, moral decisions are not made in a vacuum; both the context and situation in which these decisions are made affect these choices. For this reason, absolutist views that are situationally independent – particularly those of a deontological[15] nature – suffer an inherent flaw (Nielsen, 1972).

In a similar vein, utilitarians hold that moral judgments can apply across situations and contexts, but only insofar as those situations and contexts are similar. That is to say, an action that is considered good in one scenario may in turn become evil in another scenario – even if it is carried out in the same manner (Nielsen, 1972).

Finally, utilitarians argue that, regrettably, situations sometimes do not provide a clear choice between good and evil. That is to say, sometimes both choices are undesirable (the

[15] Deontology, unlike utilitarianism, judges the morality of an action based on its intrinsic quality and intentionality of the moral agent rather than the consequences an action begets. This ethical framework will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

opposite could also be true, but that presents a less serious dilemma). In situations where the only reasonable actions are objective evils, an evil must be the moral choice, but that "moral evil" is always the least evil option presented (Nielsen, 1972).

Though widely accepted as a viable ethical framework, utilitarianism is not without its critics. For example, Nielsen (1972) argues that it is often difficult to agree upon what constitutes a greater good, even using Bentham's (1789) guidelines. If the greater good cannot be determined, the utilitarian cannot act with any certainty. Indeed this criticism is valid, but remember Nielsen's (1972) own argument at the onset of this chapter: ethics are not simple or straightforward. Difficulties in determining what is truly ethical are commonplace in virtually all ethical frameworks, which is to be expected in a pluralistic Western society.

The issue of certainty is itself a problem. Utilitarians can never be *completely* certain that a given act will produce predicted goods or evils; unintended consequences frequently arise. Because of this, outcomes are always uncertain, which makes a utilitarian ethical decision difficult to make at the onset because the consequences of any action are always unknown (Williams, 1973; Bowen, 2004). Again, a valid critique; however, uncertainty varies in degree, and the likelihood of unintended consequences shifting the ethical evaluation of a given action are often slight. Moreover, the same arguments of uncertainty could apply to deontological ethics as well: intentionality does not guarantee an outcome of goodness, but only that the moral agent acted with a degree of rightness (Pojman, 2004). Issues of uncertainty are more or less equal problems for all ethical frameworks, and thus negate one another in a comparative sense.

Moving past criticisms of uncertainty, several scholars – Bowen (2004) among them – have argued that utilitarianism leads to a sort of tyranny of the majority in which minority needs are ignored in favor of promoting the greater good for the majority. While it is true that

utilitarianism tends to favor the majority – a position based on Bentham's (1789) principle of extension – it is incorrect to claim that utilitarians *ignore* the needs of the minority. The effect an action's outcome has on all relevant parties is weighed during decision making, and should the evil toward the minority be intense enough to outweigh the good carried out on behalf of the majority, acting in such a manner would be unethical from a utilitarian standpoint. While it is true that the needs of the majority often trump the needs of the minority, utilitarianism does not promote this position in any inherent sense, and Bentham's (1789) guidelines provide clear measures to avoid such tyranny.

Others have argued that acting in order to achieve a greater good means moral agents must oftentimes abandon important personal goals, and that acting against perceived self-interest runs counter to utilitarian ideology (Wright, 1973). Utilitarianism thus presupposes an altruistic ability to put others before the self. First, it must be pointed out that deontology would be guilty of the same flaw, as it too demands a focus on others and prohibits an act done out of pure self-interest from being considered truly moral (Kant, 1873). Second, utilitarians do not advocate abandoning self-interest so much as delaying it. From a quid pro quo understanding, one assumes that postponing one's own rewards for the good of others will eventually lead to others delaying self-interested rewards to act in a manner that leads to good for the original actor, just as the principle of fecundity would predict.

However, as Ross (1930) argues, humans may not be wired to think consistently in such a coldly rational, utilitarian manner. As Williams (1973) puts it, making the moral choice from a utilitarian standpoint often requires that individuals act against their own integrity. Indeed, even if making the choice to commit a "moral evil" is for the best, people may not find themselves able to act in such a way. According to Williams (1973), "utilitarianism alienates one from one's

moral feelings" (p. 258); this alienation from one's own self does, to some degree, remove the human element of morality from moral decision making (Ross, 1930).

It is difficult to pose a counterargument to the positions of Ross (1930) and Williams (1973). There does appear to be something within people that – despite eluding precise definition – precludes individuals from acting out of pure rationality. Utilitarianism provides a useful framework for understanding and applying ethics, but it is incomplete in its understanding of human nature.

Deontological Ethics

As opposed to the consequentialist view taken by utilitarianism, deontology is an ethical theory that holds that the "rightness and wrongness of acts are determined by the intrinsic quality of the act itself or the kind of act it is, not by its consequences" (Pojman, 2004, p. 295). Rather than directly seeking desirable consequences, deontologists argue that some acts are intrinsically good, and that goodness is an end in and of itself (Kant, 1873; Bowen, 2005).

Kant (1873) laid the groundwork for understanding deontological ethics. He believed that morality should never be judged externally from the act itself[16] and that consequences were the results of actions, not truly acts. According to Kant (1873), "a good will is good not because of what it performs or effects [sic], not by its aptness for the attainment of some proposed end, but simply by virtue of the volition, that is, it is good in itself" (p. 299).

For an act to possess intrinsic good, or what Kant (1873) referred to as moral worth, it must be done out of a sense of duty and a respect for moral law. The reason for this stipulation is that one cannot evaluate the moral worth of acts done with selfish intent or acts that result in

[16] Though deontologists oppose judging acts as morally right or wrong by seeking evidence external from an action, they do support making such judgments based on duty or intentionality, aspects that – like consequences – are external to the act itself. This point merits a brief mentioning here, but to pursue such a deep philosophical question in great detail would be tangential to the current endeavor.

selfish benefits: “As soon as a man does an action *because* he thinks he will promote his own interests thereby, he is acting not from a sense of its rightness but from self-interest” (Ross, 1930, p. 318).

Kant (1873) developed a seemingly simple measure for evaluating the intrinsic goodness of an act, a measure that he dubbed the categorical imperative. The categorical imperative, at its root, means acting under two specific conditions: (1) “I am never to act otherwise that so *that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law*” (Kant, 1873, p. 306); and (2) “*So act as to treat humanity whether in thine own person or in that of any other in every case as an end withal, never as a means only*” (Kant, 1873, p. 315).

Essentially, Kant (1873) stipulates that an act that should not be practiced commonly should not be practiced at all, and that in the quest for goodness, people must be respected for their full humanity and never used to attain some higher goal. Most important to the issue of the categorical imperative is the ability of one to universalize the maxim in question: “If the principle cannot be universalized, becomes self-contradictory, or is one that the decision maker could not accept on the receiving end of the decision, then the principle fails the test of the categorical imperative” (Bowen, 2005, p. 197).

Because of the importance of universalizing these principles, Kant’s (1873) deontology is inherently absolutist. Ross (1930) presents a deontological ethical approach similar to Kant’s (1873) in that each maintains that the rightness of an action is intrinsic and duty-based; however, Ross’s (1930) conception lacks rigid Kantian absolutism. While Ross (1930) clearly believes in the importance and application of the categorical imperative, he argues that there are instances in which we should sometimes act against a maxim we would normally follow out of a sense of duty because the consequences “would be so disastrous to others that we judge it not right to do

so" (p. 319). In other words, established principles provide useful guidelines that are nearly, but certainly not, universal. In Ross's (1930) conception of deontology, determining the rightness of actions means considering – at least to some extent – contexts, situations, and consequences. Pojman (2004), in speaking of Ross's (1930) deontological ethics, says the following:

> These principles are not absolutes, that is, duties that must never be overridden by more binding moral duties. Moral principles are *prima facie* duties. That is, while their intrinsic value is not dependent on circumstances, their application is. (p. 317)

Deontology and the Two-Way Symmetrical Model

In contrasting utilitarianism and deontology, Bowen (2004) claims the following:

> The two paradigms stand in diametrical oppositions by utilitarianism seeking to decide the ethicality of a decision based on the potential consequences of that decision, and deontology making a decision based on its moral fortitude rather than the consequences. (p. 70)

While an argument could be made that the two views are not completely alienated from one another, this diametric opposition provides a useful context for discussion. Regardless of whether Bowen's (2004) statement is true, excellent practitioners must operate as though it were, separating completely consequences from intentionality and ethical judgments of actions.

Excellence theory asserts that two-way symmetrical communication is inherently more ethical than the asymmetric models, and for this statement to be true, consequences must be removed from the equation of determining ethicality. Similar consequences can result from dissimilar actions; for instance, both asymmetrical and symmetrical tactics could yield the same end through different means. If ends are used to judge the morality of an action, asymmetry stands on equal ground with symmetry, thus destroying the excellence claim of moral

superiority; however, in approaching ethics deontologically, the means to achieve those ends can be used to judge ethicality and symmetry can potentially emerge as morally superior. For these reasons, it would appear that the less absolutist views of Ross (1930) do not apply to excellence theory's conception of ethicality – despite their deontological roots.

In general, excellence theory seems to follow an absolutist deontological path, seeing the Kantian approach as more compatible with two-way symmetry than would be a utilitarian framework. Bowen (2004), for example, argues that using a deontological approach to public relations ethics is sensible because of the similarities between deontology and excellence theory: "Deontology is based on the moral autonomy of the individual, similar to the autonomy and freedom from encroachment that public relations seeks to be considered excellent" (p. 70). L. A. Grunig and Toth (2006) also support a deontological approach because they view this standpoint as ethically superior to utilitarianism:

> In this increasingly diverse world, deontology makes more sense than utilitarianism for two main reasons. First, consequentialist ethics favors the majority over the minority; second the effect of emphasizing consequences is the tendency to treat people as ends, rather than valuing them in and of themselves. (p. 51)[17]

Bowen in particular, across numerous works, has advanced a deontological approach to public relations ethics for various reasons. One is that of convenience; because deontology provides a more authoritative approach, it is easier to judge actions as ethical or unethical and is thus a simpler paradigm within which to work (Bowen, 2004).

Other reasons to use this approach are based on shared principles, particularly that of autonomy. Just as moral agents need autonomy to act out of duty, PR practitioners need

[17] The first of these two criticisms of utilitarianism has been addressed previously. The issue of using individuals as means to organizational ends is a more complex issue discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

autonomy to act "without fear of harmful repercussion," to be "free and open to ideas," and to avoid feeling "constrained by their organizational positions" (Bowen, 2004, p. 81). Though Bowen (2004) admits that such a level of autonomy is unlikely because practitioners must act on behalf of several publics, the drive for it nonetheless remains important.

The most prominent reason for choosing a deontological paradigm, however, appears to be that it provides a goodness of fit for excellence theory, enabling its proponents to uphold the stance of moral superiority two-way symmetrical communication allegedly possesses. Bowen (2004) sees her work with deontology as an extension of excellence theory's definition of ethics:

> The conceptualization of ethics in the excellence study is expanded here through in-depth study of moral philosophy, thereby forming a conceptualization that combines public relations theory and Kantian philosophy. Out of that combination, a normative model is developed for use in public relations decision making. (p. 66)

Again, the use of the Kantian categorical imperative to define what is ethical fits well within the excellence model because it negates the important role of consequences. Still, according to Bowen (2004), "by its nature, answering the question 'What is ethically right?' commands consideration of the consequences of a decision, without requiring a decision to be dictated by those consequences" (p. 86). Even using a deontological framework, it appears impossible to *eliminate* the role of consequences in determining ethicality, but Bowen (2004) remains able to *minimize* the role of outcomes in moral considerations.

Just as excellence theory and Bowen's deontological approach share a normative base, they share a support of dialogue. Bowen (2005) argues that organizations are morally obligated to engage in dialogue with publics, and because of this obligation, two-way symmetry necessarily emerges as "an inherently ethical form of communication" (p. 199). If the principle

of dialogue is valued over all else, two-way symmetry is inherently more ethical as the deontological stance would predict. However, as previously noted, dialogue can create morally reprehensible consequences; therefore, from a utilitarian standpoint – or even the less absolutist understanding of deontology forwarded by Ross (1930) – no tactic is inherently ethical, but can only be evaluated in the context of the consequences it begets.

The question of whether two-way symmetrical communication is inherently the most ethical PR strategy rests on the assumption that an absolutist Kantian deontology is always the best and most applicable method to evaluate ethicality. But there is considerable evidence to the contrary.

A Brief Illustrative Example

Consider the following example:

A PR practitioner works for a children's hospital that provides needed medical care to disabled children. Most of the care the hospital provides is contingent upon receiving donations from the community, and a primary function of this PR practitioner is fundraising.

The hospital sponsors a local, week-long circus within the community, which has typically been the chief fundraising event for the organization. Over the past three years, however, circus attendance has steadily declined and there is a fear that this downward slump will continue. Should the hospital fail to reach its funding goals, it will be unable to adequately treat patients in need of such unique care.

Through considerable market research, the PR practitioner has determined that, over the past several years, community awareness of the circus event has decreased as has media coverage leading up to the circus. The practitioner feels that increasing media coverage of the event will increase community awareness, subsequent attendance, and raised funds.

The circus opens to the general public on a Saturday; however, rehearsals of all the acts take place for the three days preceding opening day. The PR practitioner invites several patients of the hospital – all disabled children – to witness the rehearsals and participate in the circus activities. The practitioner also invites local media outlets to cover this exclusive event which in turn yields several compelling images – both through video and photographs – that the media use to construct stories about what the children's hospital does for disabled children and how crucial a fundraising event the circus is.

As a result of print and broadcast media exposure leading up to the event, the circus sees increased attendance and the hospital gains needed funds to treat disabled children – some of the very same children featured in media stories, photographs, and videos.

From a utilitarian standpoint, this practitioner acted ethically. In no way were the children physically or emotionally harmed in participating in the media event; in fact, it is likely they, like most children, enjoyed a trip to the circus.

The media were also treated fairly and seized the opportunity to present a story of community importance to their audiences. These messages were no doubt persuasive emotional appeals to the public, but no lies were constructed in advocating for greater circus attendance. Moreover, it is likely that attendees enjoyed the experience and felt good about aiding a worthy charitable cause.

The hospital also clearly benefited from the media event, as attendance – and more importantly revenue – increased. This in turn benefits the current and future patients of that hospital as well as the PR practitioner, who developed a successful media campaign.

From a deontological standpoint, however, the practitioner acted immorally. First, because the PR practitioner likely had selfish motives – i.e., the furthering of a career – there is

no way to determine whether the campaign was constructed out of moral fortitude. This, at best, makes the practitioner's actions amoral.

What is immoral here, from a deontological standpoint, is the blatant use of disabled children as means to the organizational end of raising funds for the hospital. There is no question that, although the practitioner probably enjoyed providing the children an opportunity to see the circus, the driving motivation was using these children to garner needed media coverage.

In the purely theoretical sense, this case is deontologically unethical. However, the layman would probably not consider such an act to be immoral; everybody seems to win and nobody appears to be hurt. Consider Ross's (1930) point that sometimes consequences can shift the circumstances of when a given maxim is ethical; this appears to be the case here. A pure deontological approach causes one to label an otherwise moral – or potentially amoral – action immoral because it violates an abstract principle in the successful pursuit of ethical consequences. Such rigidity is wrong.

Assume for a moment, however, that this deontological take were correct. How does one construct the categorical imperative to prevent similar wrongdoing in the future? Perhaps the maxim is: "One should not use disabled children to garner media attention." Would the maxim stand if the word "use" were replaced with "feature?" Clearly those must not be the same, as awareness is a necessary and ethically accepted way to promote a cause. Or is it always wrong to "use" or even "feature" people in this manner? Does the problem arise because they are children? Is the problem disability? Is the problem the media attention? What *exactly* about this scenario makes it unethical?

Clearly constructing a categorical imperative is much more difficult than one might imagine, and much less objective too. Indeed, what constitutes a maxim is subjectively

constructed at some level and subjectively deconstructed when another individual tries to apply that maxim for future use.

Excellence Falls from its Ethics Pedestal

Ironically, deontology is the preferred ethical choice of excellence theorists because of the fear of moral relativism, despite the fact that subjectivity is apparently a part of this ethical model as well, as the above example illustrates. Although excellence theorists fear this relativism, PR practitioners seem to embrace it, as a situational ethic is typically employed in favor of a deontological approach (Bowen, 2004). A more situation-based approach to ethics resembles contingency more so than it does excellence, so perhaps fear of being replaced by a competing theory motivates the avoidance of situational ethical frameworks. In either case, situational ethics can exist without devolving into a state of complete moral relativism in which no standard of morality exists. Utilitarianism is one situation-based approach to ethics that meets this criterion.

Excellence theorists also argue that ethicality – and thus excellent deontology – is important in achieving organizational effectiveness. As Bowen (2008) states, "Ethical behavior furthers the ability of the organization to build long-term relations and stability, and therefore, enhance organization effectiveness" (p. 292). This statement is completely accurate, but the *perception* of ethical action is just as important to this endeavor as ethical action itself, and there is no reason to assume that a deontology-based view of ethics creates this needed perspective. Again, referring to the circus example, it is likely that the public would not only condone but approve of the hospital's action because people are just as unlikely to be rigidly deontological as they are to be rigidly utilitarian.

Moreover, two-way symmetrical approaches, which are often accommodative, are sometimes unethical because of the disastrous consequences that result. Even deontologists cede that consequences cannot be completely disregarded in ethical considerations (Ross, 1930; Bowen, 2004). With this in mind, Cameron et al. (2008) argues that a contingent approach that allows for greater advocacy is sometimes more ethical than the excellence model because the consequences of the latter approach are often ethically unacceptable.

Negating – or even minimizing – the effect of consequences on ethical decision making is as equally absurd as expecting people to act from a coldly rational and emotionless stance of rigid utilitarianism, yet this is the Kantian model. This approach to deontology, according to Nielsen (1972), is seen as a "normative ethical theory which maintains that there is a privileged moral principle or cluster of moral principles, prescribing determinate actions with which it would always be wrong not to act in accordance no matter what the consequences" (p. 237).

Indeed, Nielsen's (1972) argument for considering consequences is echoed by some excellence theorists. According to J. E. Grunig and White (1992), "consequences on others are important in public relations. […] Asymmetrical public relations can be ethical if its practitioners can show that the consequences of their behavior do not harm people" (p. 57). This certainly appears to be the case with the press agent/public information practitioner in the circus example, insofar as it is evaluated with some consequentialist consideration.

As J. E. Grunig and White (1992) point out very clearly, allowing for consequences to factor into ethical evaluations – which they do – means surrendering the inherent ethical superiority of two-way symmetry. Though that claim of ethical superiority is overtly fallacious, there are reasons beyond the importance of considering consequences as to why an excellent

deontological approach is actually *less* ethical, and certainly less applicable, than an approach at least somewhat based on utilitarian philosophy.

Implausibility and Inapplicability of a Kantian Approach to PR Ethics

Kantian deontology rests on the assumption that humans can and do act rationally as autonomous moral agents (Bowen, 2004; Bowen, 2005). In defining the law of autonomy, Sullivan (1989) states that "a moral agent is an agent who can act autonomously, that is, as a law unto himself or herself on the basis of objective maxims of his or her reason alone" (p. 48). Just as emotions and feelings prevent the pure rationality needed to act in a complete utilitarian manner, they also prevent people from acting completely deontologically.

Bivins (2006) also asserts that "the ability to respond based entirely on self-motivation (or autonomy) is also limited by role and environment" (p. 23). Bowen's (2004) argument that organizations must allow practitioners to act freely in order for them to act deontologically ethical is an accurate one, but it is unlikely that any organizational environment would allow for complete autonomy (Dozier and L. A. Grunig, 1992). Beyond the individual practitioner, PR departments often lack autonomy themselves as they may be subjugated to marketing, legal, media relations, or other communication departments (Bowen, 2005; Bowen, 2008; Ehling, White, and J. E. Grunig, 1992; J. E. Grunig, 2006; J. E. Grunig and Repper, 1992; L. A. Grunig and Toth, 2006).

Moreover, Bowen's (2004; 2005) deontological model trades a problem of utilitarianism for a similar and equally undesirable problem of deontology. As was previously discussed, critics of utilitarianism fear that such an ethical approach leads to a sort of tyranny of the majority (Bowen, 2004). A deontological framework, however, "consistently allows the minority to have just as much impact on an issue as the majority" (Bowen, 2004, p. 74). There is no question that

the minority should have the ability to impact issues, and the *chance* to impact issues should possibly be the same as that of the majority, but the *ability* to have such an impact should not be equal for the majority and the minority. Such a scenario would lead to a tyranny of the minority, which is as equally unjust as the feared tyranny of the majority that utilitarianism supposedly represents.

Moreover, the Kantian deontological model of ethical public relations practice also lacks the universal nature any deontological approach would necessarily require. According to Bowen (2005), "organizations headquartered in countries without a Judeo-Christian ethical basis […] might find implementing the model difficult" (p. 211). As Bowen (2005) herself argues, deontological principles fail the all important categorical imperative if they cannot be universalized, and seeing as such a model is culturally specific, it cannot be universal, it fails the test of the categorical imperative, and therefore becomes inapplicable.

Even if this ethical approach were applicable, issues of legality would lead practitioners to adopt a more consequentialist ethic. Consider the following:

- Importantly, under FTC guidelines, participants in the commercial marketplace must be able to verify the truthfulness of their claims. Additionally, the intentions of a speaker are irrelevant in judicial determinations regarding the deceptive nature of particular communications. (Fitzpatrick, 2006, p. 8)
- The simplest formula is that a person can be held accountable if (1) the person is functionality and/or morally responsible for an action, (2) some harm occurred due to that action, and (3) the responsible person had no legitimate excuse for the action. (Bivins, 2006, p. 21)

The legal and ethical takeaways here are twofold. First, the law – and often the public – does not take intentionality into serious account in evaluating wrongdoing. Second, external entities hold practitioners accountable for their actions as well as the consequences that these actions beget. If intentionality counts for naught and consequences are the societal crux for making ethical judgments, an excellent deontological approach would have little value.

Hegemony and Excellent Deontology

The Kantian deontological ethical approach also lays a foundation upon which excellence theorists' accusations of asymmetrical hegemony can be turned against itself, creating an understanding of two-way symmetrical communication as a hegemonic practice. From a deontological, two-way symmetrical approach, the ethicality of any action is grounded in duty-based intention as opposed to an action's consequences. Intentions, unlike consequences, are unobservable and known only to the actor. From an observer's point of view, one must ask if two-way symmetrical practitioners act out of a moral, duty-based intention to create dialogue, or whether they use dialogue as a less socially scrutinized means of coercive hegemonic control.

Typically, when talking of hegemony and the Grunigian models of public relations, asymmetrical tactics have been demonized. J. E. Grunig and White (1992) argue that "practitioners with an asymmetrical worldview presuppose that the organization knows best and that publics benefit from 'cooperating' with it" (p. 40). This paternalistic view, then, supposedly leads to hegemony, which Roper (2005) defines as "domination without physical coercion through the widespread acceptance of particular ideologies and consent to the practices associated with those ideologies" (p. 70).

First, on J. E. Grunig and White's (1992) point, their criticism is clearly one of an asymmetrical worldview as opposed to one of asymmetrical practices. Putting that logistical

piece aside, one must consider the possibility that the organization is right; that is, it does in fact know what is best for the public. In these instances, the organization should aggressively persuade the public to cooperate with it; however, determining whether the organization or the public is correct in such conflicts is only accomplished in hindsight. Regardless of who is right, organizations often operate as though they do know what is best for the general public, but that does not make them inherently evil or unethical; at best it provides a necessary but insufficient condition for hegemony (Cancel et al., 1999, p. 173).

Two-way symmetry, on the other hand, appears to possess hegemonic potential – at least insofar as any asymmetric tactic does. Though excellence theory lacks a complete understanding of power differentials and dynamics, the way each functions creates conditions for hegemony. According to Roper (2005), power dynamics are fluid and manifested in the early 21st century as follows:

> The neo-liberal approach to global free markets has ultimately placed corporations in a position of power over both the state […] and the citizens of civil society, with the national governments favoring the economic sector over the civil society in policy decisions. (p. 74)

Though corporations may potentially control policy decisions, they still need societal legitimization of their practices. However, as Roper (2005) argues, "dominant power blocs of the state (or the economy) can compensate for the lack of policy rationality" (p. 75). In other words, corporations can use their power hegemonically to bypass societal legitimization of policy decisions. For this reason, how corporations manage and maintain the power they have been afforded becomes critical.

Dialogue, arguably the central principle of two-way communication, is one way to manage power relations. Dialogic communication between organizations and publics, however, is difficult to keep free and open to all affected parties. According to Palenchar and Heath (2006), "such communication is likely to be disproportionately shaped by key players, industry, government, media, and activists" (p. 149). Only powerful groups and individuals engage in such dialogue, and because these groups and individuals can never represent an actual public in a complete sense, many affected parties are still left without a voice despite – and perhaps because of – the guise of dialogue.

For Roper (2005), whether two-way symmetrical dialogue is hegemonic rests on the key question of "whether the objective of [excellence theory's] relationship management is to maintain an environment that enables organizations to meet their own policy objectives or whether it entails a collaborative negotiation of policy objectives themselves" (p. 76). Murphy (1991) argued that chaotic coorientation, a process that results from excellent practice, can lead to a fixation on the status quo by both the public and the organization. If the status quo is the tacit acceptance of organizational policy objectives, two-way symmetry is likely to create a spiral of reciprocation in which dialogue and accommodation maintain such hegemony rather than challenge it.

Additionally, as Bowen (2008) points out, "excellence theory (J. E. Grunig, 1992) holds that the function [of public relations] should be responsible for conducting research on these publics and maintaining linkages with strategic publics in the organization's environment" (p. 274). Research is a useful tool in relationship maintenance, and it presumably leads to change either on the part of the organization (which would be more two-way symmetrical) or an attempt to enact change on the part of publics (a more asymmetrical practice).

Both symmetric and asymmetric tactics are capable of creating a type of paternalism that could in turn lead to hegemonic control. However, concessional changes on the part of an organization to appease a public – generally an accommodative and symmetrical approach – could be a soft-power exercise in hegemony. Roper (2005) describes this process in the following manner:

> It can be argued that the organizations that, from their dominant but challenged positions, make substantive changes to their practices, do so in order to maintain their existing hegemony. […] Does this make them 'excellent' organizations? What they have attempted to do, in practice, is to make sufficient concession [sic] to deflect the more wide reaching opposition. (p. 82)

The excellent approach to social responsibility provides a good example of such hegemonic practice. For excellence theorists, social responsibility means that "organizations manage with an eye on the effects of their decisions on society as well as on the organization" (J. E. Grunig, 1992b, p. 17). The question, then, is to what end are these socially responsible efforts and subsequent concessions made? Again, Roper (2005) states:

> Are they 'just enough' to quiet public criticism, allowing essentially a business as usual strategy to remain in force? Are they allowing the continuing co-operation between business and government, preventing the introduction of unwelcome legislation – and what is the price? (p. 83)

Again, the advantage of using a deontological approach is clear because it judges the ethicality of actions based on unobservable intentions, but the consequences of those actions point to a practice that is potentially hegemonic. As L. A. Grunig (1992b) argues, organizations practice symmetrical public relations to illustrate social responsibility, but what are the benefits

of such a display? Socially responsible organizations act in such a manner because "ethical behavior helps corporations to enhance the bottom line" (L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Ehling, 1992, p. 85).

Practicing social responsibility using the two-way symmetrical model in order to be perceived as ethical and thus enhance the organization's bottom line is not altruistic; it is manipulative – at least to an equal degree of many asymmetric tactics. Such soft power coercion – which is sometimes, but not always the result of two-way symmetrical practice – is hegemonic. Moreover, from the excellent deontological standpoint, such a practice would be unethical as well because it is not done out of duty but rather out of a desire to gain selfish benefits.

Excellent Utilitarianism?

Excellence theory must adhere to an absolutist deontological standard to justify its two-way symmetrical best-practice stance. Practitioners, however, cannot reach that standard consistently, probably because it is exceptionally high. Still, the choice to use a deontological approach is one largely motivated by convenience, as Bowen (2004) describes. At other times during its conception, maintaining that two-way symmetry is the most ethical PR practice has been more conveniently accomplished by relying on a consequentialist approach.

To present asymmetric communication as paternalistic and hegemonic, and by extension advance an ethically favorable view of two-way symmetry, J. E. Grunig (1989) argued the following:

> Although the asymmetrical perspective may sound like a reasonable position, keep in mind that organizations often expect publics to accept strange things as a result of 'cooperation': pollution, toxic waste, drinking, smoking, guns, overthrow of governments, dangerous products, lowered salary and benefits, discrimination against

> women and minorities, jobs, layoffs, dangerous manufacturing plants, risky transportation of products, higher prices, monopoly power, poor product quality, political favoritism, use of poisonous chemicals, exposure to carcinogens, nuclear weapons, and even warfare. The list could go on and on. (p. 32)

While this is undoubtedly true, asymmetrical practices have been used to breed *non*-acceptance of many of the dangers on this laundry list of negative outcomes. Take smoking as just one example.

In the case of cigarette smoking, consider the widely known anti-smoking "truth" campaign. One advertisement featured a group of people unloading 1,200 body bags from several trucks and subsequently piling them in front of a major tobacco company. The message: "Every day 1200 people die from tobacco" (TheTruth.com, 2000). While this message may indeed be "the truth," there is no question that is an asymmetrically driven, sensationalist act of press agentry.

In analyzing the attack on tobacco companies embodied by such tactics, however, Garfield (2000) argues that "you can hardly blame the anti-tobacco movement for wanting to demonize Big Tobacco in their efforts to dissuade young people from smoking" (p. 63). This asymmetric message is condoned, while a similar asymmetric tactic used to persuade people to smoke is condemned, a condemnation evidenced by legal action against tobacco companies and clear restrictions on cigarette advertising as well as cigarette use in some public settings. From a tactical standpoint – that is considering only the means – there is no real difference. The difference, as well as the condoning or condemning, comes from the varied consequences that result. Society approves of asymmetric messages as long as they result in positive consequences, namely the countering of culturally accepted evils such as cigarette smoking.

From a utilitarian standpoint, then, it is impossible to say that any given means or PR tactic is inherently better than another without considering the consequences. Under such a model, two-way symmetrical communications cannot be inherently more ethical. The same could be said of any version of deontology that is less than absolute – such as the model conceived by Ross (1930) – as allowing for the consideration of consequences at any level negates any inherent ethicality to which two-way symmetry has laid claim. Finally, the Kantian model of absolutist deontology is riddled with complexities that prohibit widespread usefulness and applicability. Moreover, the standard such a model sets is so high that it is unlikely to be consistently achieved.

Bearing all this in mind, it is impossible for a communication tactic to be ethically superior to another across all situations, cultures, and moments in time; therefore, the excellence claim that the two-way symmetrical approach is always the most ethical of the four models is false.

CHAPTER 11

CONCLUSION

The preceding arguments cast serious doubts on the efficacy of excellence theory and at the very least provide a context for clearly seeing the fallibility of the model. Excellence theory, however, like any theory, does have some strongly supported propositions (the situational theory of publics, roles theory, etc.). Moreover, two-way symmetrical communication undoubtedly has its use, but that use is limited by circumstance, just as contingency theory would predict. Because of such limitations, there is enough viable evidence to reject a best-practice orientation toward the excellence models.

Such a blunt criticism of excellence theory may appear bold, but based on the evidence presented here, this claim is exceedingly reasonable. It is only because excellence theory oftentimes goes unchallenged or because critiques are indirect that a straightforward rejection of the theory's major tenet might seem odd or unfamiliar.

As the reader has seen, however, scholars from the public relations field – and other fields as well – have made great strides to achieving the rejection of that best-practice approach. Excellence is theoretically weak in many ways. It does not provide a grand theory of public relations as it claims, but simply a conceptual framework which lacks complete scientific acceptance (Reynolds, 1971; Baran and Davis, 2006; D. Krugman, personal communication, October 21, 2009).

Excellence theory suffers from several non-refuting anomalies as well, and many of the problems created by the best-practice model can be resolved using a contingent approach to

achieve all of the following: positive applicability, alternative approaches upon the failure of dialogue, cross-cultural viability, the ability to address pragmatic issues such as those posed by activist publics, and the theoretical flexibility to account for complex concepts such as power (Anderson, 1983).

Problems of explanatory power are also present (Chaffee and Berger, 1987). One would expect the theory to adequately describe and categorize the means of PR practice; however, J. E. Grunig and L. A. Grunig (1992) report low alpha scores when measuring the reliability of the four models, an important criticism of which is levied by Leichty and Springston (1993). These critics also point out methodological problems of the fractionation scale employed in the study, as well reasons to doubt the excellence study's ability to consistently differentiate symmetric and asymmetric practices.

Excellence theory also faces difficulties concerning predictive power (Chaffee and Berger, 1987). Were the theory positive, one would expect to see two-way symmetrical communication practiced commonly. Several scholars, Murphy (1991) perhaps being the most noteworthy, have shown the two-way symmetric model to lack such positive applicability as evidenced by the rarity of its use. Moreover, Leichty (1997) as well as several contingency theorists have consistently addressed the limited effectiveness of core symmetrical tactics such as dialogue, accommodation, and collaboration (Cancel, et al., 1997; Cancel et al., 1999; Cameron, 1997; Cameron et al., 2008).

Internal inconsistencies are also prevalent throughout the development of excellence theory and even within individual works concerning the theory (Chaffee and Berger, 1987). The shifting definitions of excellence and effectiveness present in J. E. Grunig's (1992a) work provide one example of such inconsistency. Additionally, the understanding of what constitutes

excellent practice and what tactics are forbidden to excellent practitioners have also shifted as the theory has evolved. Finally, excellence theory's attempts to expand through co-option of other models and shifting definitions of what constitutes acceptable PR practice have eliminated any visible boundary conditions, which are structurally important for any viable communication theory (Chaffee and Berger, 1987).

All of these above issues cast doubt on the efficacy of excellence theory, but the ethicality of the model is also questionable. The inherent ethical superiority of two-way symmetry that excellence theory purports can only exist within an absolutist deontological understanding of ethics. There is, however, good reason to believe that such an approach is unreasonable because it is both practically unattainable and because consequentialist considerations are important for PR practitioners (Fitzpatrick, 2006; Bivins, 2006).

Moreover, even within such a framework, two-way symmetry possesses the potential for hegemony, which is unquestionably an unethical practice (Roper, 2005). No framework of ethics is absolute in a pure sense and no model of PR is always ethical across all cultures, time periods, or situations. Sometimes symmetry is the most ethical approach; other times a more asymmetric tactic is needed. This statement is not one of pure ethical relativism, but rather one of contingency.

Indeed, the practice of public relations is contingent upon so many factors that the very theory that bears the name "contingency" may even be too narrow in its understanding of PR practice (Szlemko and Christen, 2007). There is no reason to assume, then, that the conceptually narrower best-practice excellence theory would fare any better in explaining or predicting PR practice. The glaring problems of validity, reliability, explanatory power, predictive power,

efficacy, and ethicality on the part of excellence theory – at the very least – suggest that this model does not represent an objective truth or an accurate representation of PR practice.

Excellence theory must be questioned, and questioned vigorously – as should all theories. At some point, perhaps in the near future, PR scholars may find that it is time to move beyond excellence theory toward a better central conception of public relations.

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